Caraval

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Caraval

by Tina_Mairin_Goldstein

Summary

All his life, Will Graham has dreamed of the magic of Caraval- A game of wonder and magic, where the players compete to win a wonderous prize. He has spent the past ten years writing to Legend, the Master of Caraval, hoping to play the game, though he has never left the tiny Isle of Wolf Trap. And now that his cruel and powerful father has arranged a marriage for the young omega, those dreams seem shattered.

But Legend has finally written back, and he has invited Will to play his game. With his younger sister Abigail and the help of a mysterious sailor, Will escapes from Wolf Trap and arrives at Caraval. But no sooner have they arrived does Abigail disappear- Kidnapped by the mastermind of Caraval himself. This year, Caraval revolves around finding Abigail herself to claim the prize.

Will has been told that everything that happens during Caraval is nothing more than a game, a performance, but he quickly learns that not everything is as it seems. Caraval is more dangerous than it seems, with a dark and bloody past he quickly begins to unravel. Now, with the help of the sailor Hannibal, he must race to find Abigail before the others and win Caraval, before his sister disappears forever... Or worse.

Notes

Okay, so the very end of this story was originally posted in my other story, **Fragments**, and if you've read that, please don't spoil it for anyone else! This story is based off the book ***Caraval*** by Stephanie Garber, and will follow similar lines of the book, but with a Hannibal twist.

Writing letters is not my strong suit, so please give the second chapter a try before giving up on this. I know Will might seem out of character, but as pointed out in ***Red Dragon*** people can sound very different when they write letters than how they actually speak or act.

As always, polite questions and comments are welcome, no matter how long after posting!

Chapter 1

Social interactions of any kind were not Will Graham's strong suit. But by far, writing a letter to a complete stanger was the hardest kind.

It took him almost ten years to get the letter right.

Year 51

To Mister Caraval Master,

My name is Will Graham. I am from the Conquered Isles. The Isle of Wolf Trap, specifically. I doubt you have heard it, but I was hoping you and your amazing performers and players might visit our island this year. I am not asking for myself. I am asking for my little sister, Abigail. She loves the stories of Caraval and we have had a hard year this year. It is almost her birthday, and I know it would mean a lot to her if you visited.

Will Graham

Year 52

To the Master of Carval,

It's Will Graham again. I understand that it might have been difficult to reach Wolf Trap, but I am asking you to come this year, for my sister. We would both love to see your magic and games.

Sorry that this letter is short, my father will be angry if he catches me writing to you.

Sincerely, Will Graham

Year 53

To the Master of Carval,

I am asking again. My sister says she doesn't want to celebrate her birthdays any longer, but I know it's just a lie. She is just feeling sad, and maybe a little upset that you haven't come. She isn't the only one who would love to see you and your performers. I like the stories, too. She will be nine this Growing Season, and I'll be thirteen. If she needs an escort, I can look after her just fine.

Caraval seems like it would be wonderful. Beautiful. Full of magic and wonders. I would love to play the game one day. My sister says I see what other people don't. That my brain works differently. Maybe it's true. Maybe Caraval would let me see if that's true.

Sincerely, Will Graham

Year 54

To Legend, Master of Caraval,

I apologize for getting your name wrong. I hope that isn't why you haven't responded to any of my letters. I am asking again if you might come perform here. You were close last year, but my sister and I are not allowed to leave Wolf Trap until I am married. My stepfather says that an unmated omega shouldn't travel alone and that such a place would be dangerous for one.

Sincerely, Will Graham

Year 55

To Legend, Master of Caraval,

I would still love to play your game. I am fascinated by it. I am older now, and I think I would be able to hold my own just fine. Is that why you haven't written back? I was too young for Caraval? And was Abigail, too? I am fifteen and she is eleven this year. Is that still too young? Could we watch instead of play, maybe? We would both love to see it, even if we couldn't play.

I know you never visit the same place twice and that maybe Wolf Trap, being one of the Conquered Isles, would count as the same place, but my sister and I would still love to see you.

Sincerely, Will Graham

P.S.- I apologize for the rips on this letter; my dog tried to eat it and I didn't have time to rewrite it.

Year 56

To Master Legend,

The news of what happened just reached Wolf Trap. I don't believe it, not without more evidence than a few rumors. I doubt you truly are a murderer. The stories of Caraval are filled with warnings of what may happen. I am sure it was an accident, like in past years.

People really should listen to warnings.

Will Graham

Year 57

To Master Legend,

I am sorry to hear that you and your performers won't be traveling for a while. I have heard more rumors and stories, and each seems more unbelievable than the last. It isn't right to call someone a murderer without evidence or a proper investigation.

I hope you are able to clear your name.

Sincerely, Will Graham

Year 60

To Master Legend,

I'm happy to hear that you and your performers have started Caravel again.

Things here... We could use a little magic and escape, me and Abigal. I could. I realize that maybe you have ignored me because you believe I have no way to pay for tickets. I can pay you with labor or the money I've saved. I am a fair fisherman, I can train dogs, and I am skilled enough at hard labor, if that is acceptable payment. I've heard the stories of what you offer people. Magic and escape, and a way to know themselves more clearly than they ever have. I would very much like to know myself. I feel like I am running out of time.

Sorry, that wasn't something I needed to write to you about. There is no one here I can talk to, and you seem like the safest person to vent to.

Sincerely, Will Graham

Year 61

To Master Legend,

This is my final letter. I am to be married and mated soon. I apologize if I have bothered you over the years. It would be best if you forgot all about this.

Will Graham

Year 61

To Mr. Will Graham from the Conquered Isle of Wolf Trap,

I would like to offer my congratulations on your upcoming nuptials. I know it can be an equally exciting and trying time, especially for an omega. Your letters over the years have not bothered me in the slightest. I regret to inform you that my players and I are not traveling this year. Our next performance is by invitation only. As I know how trying a new relationship can be, I would like to invite you and your mate-to-be to come to our performance. Give you a chance to know yourself and each other.

Please accept the enclosed items as a gift.

From the pen of Legend, Master of Caraval

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Will receives a letter.

Chapter Notes

TW/CT: There is brief abuse in this chapter, with a parent hitting their child and mentions thereof, which will be referenced throughout the story.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Will could not believe it. His head seemed to buzz, his heart pounded in his chest. He had not felt this excited in... Well, a very long time.

He had reread the letter four times before it had sunk in, his fingers tracing the symbol of Caraval- Two feathered stags with their heads bowed to each other, a teardrop caught between their interlocked antlers. It looked black but flashed silver in the light, matching the watermark on the slips of paper that had also been enclosed in the elegant envelope.

It was no prank. Legend had written back.

"Abigail!" he called out, following her honeysuckle scent down to the barrel room.

As a beta, her scent was subtler than his own omega scent- saltwater and lemons- and his was a little overpowering with his emotions at the moment. But he was able to follow it, though his little sister had led him on quite the hunt.

"Abigail!" he called again, plunging down into the barrel room.

The scent of oak, molasses, and mulling spices filled his nose, along with sweeter, fruiter scents, and his eyes quickly adjusted to the dimmer light.

"Where are you, Abigal?" he demanded.

The oil lamps spilled light over fresh barrels and amber rum bottles- He stopped as he heard a moan.

After their father's latest... Incident, Abigail had probably come down here and gotten drunk. Will did not approve, but he understood. His sister was probably passed out drunk on the floor, or on her way there, judging by the heavy breathing. He knew things were hard for

Abigail. Their father was not the best man, and being a beta, Abigail was stuck in a kind of purgatory. Betas were often shuffled to the side, especially in the richer and nobler families. Despite their father's love, the same was happening to her.

"Abi-" Will began, breaking off as he caught sight of what awaited him.

And he really should have smelled it before.

"Hi, Will." Abigail said, flashing him a smile of white teeth.

Her cheeks were flushed, and her lips looked a little swollen, her auburn hair mussed. Her shawl had pooled on the floor. This was not what made Will stair. It was the sailor who held her waist, so small in his large hands.

"D-Did I interrupt something?" Will stuttered out, resisting the urge to bare his teeth as he breathed in the scent of musk and something like blood.

Alpha. There was an *alpha* will his hands all over his sister.

"Nothing that can be resumed." the alpha said, his smooth, Northern accent unlike the thicker ones Will was accustomed to hearing.

"Will, you remember Hannibal, right?" Abigail asked with a giggle, keeping the alpha's hands on her waist.

"I do." Will said, flashing the alpha a look.

"Lovely to see you again, William." Hannibal said, offering him a charming, seductive smile.

Will knew it would have been polite to respond. He should respond. He had been taught to be a good omega. But all he could see was Hannibal's hands twined in his sister's green skirts, playing with the ribbon tied at her back like she was a delicacy he couldn't wait to unwrap. He had the sudden urge to sink his teeth into the other man and rip until his mouth filled with blood.

The alpha had been on Wolf Trap for a month. He was tall and had light brown hair that fell over his forehead in an alluring way, drawing attention to his strangely maroon eyes and sharp features. He was foreign, charming, and handsome, and he certainly knew about those latter two well. He was older, about ten years older than Will, and he used that charm and his looks to his advantage. Many women's and omega's heads had turned the day he had arrived. Even Will had snuck a glance, but no more than that. He knew better.

"Abigail, I need to talk to you." Will said, swallowing, realizing he had been staring at Hannibal.

He took his sister's hand and pulled her through the barrels until they were out of Hannibal's hearing range, then stopped and growled at her a little.

"Abigail, what are you doing?" he demanded, feeling a surge of protectiveness for her.

"Will, you're going to be mated soon. I imagine you know what goes on between men and women, alphas and omegas." Abigail said, her eyes glinting with a bit of dark mischief.

"That's not what I wanted to talk about. And you know what will happen if Father catches you." Will said, scowling.

"That's why I don't plan on getting caught." Abigail said.

"I'm being serious, Abby."

"I know. If Father finds out, I'll find a way to blame it on you, don't worry. Now what did you want to talk to me about?" Abigail said and Will held up the envelope in response.

The metallic ink on the edges caught the light and shone like molten gold, like magic, the faint perfume of roses that clung to it meeting Will's nose again, as if a bouquet of the real flowers had been handed to him. The words on the front blazed a darker shade, still making his heart leap.

Mr. Will Graham
In the care of the priests' confessional
Wolf Trap
The Conquered Isles

Abigail's eyes trailed over the ink. She had always loved pretty things, much like the man she had left waiting. Will had no care for shiny, sparkly things like she did, and whenever he came across something, he would give it to his younger sister, so the windowsills in her glittered with rocks, sea glass, and random things.

But Abigail did not look longingly at the ink, nor did she reach to take it. She kept her hands at her sides.

"Is it another letter from the count?" she asked, voice deadly.

The count. Will's mate-to-be. He almost jumped to the defense of him, but the truth was, Will had never even met him. He had dutifully been sending poetic letters since the engagement, speaking kindly to Will, his words elegant and reassuring. Will was not sure if he trusted them, not entirely. Anyone could write pretty words, but he had to have a little faith. He did not say a word in the count's defense, however, because Abigail had made it clear what she thought of the situation. She did not understand Will's desire to be mated to a man he had never met, to be whisked away from Wolf Trap and bear a stranger's pups for as long as the alpha wanted.

It didn't matter that arranged marriages were still the fashion all across the empire, especially for omegas of Will's position, and he didn't bother to point it out to Abigail. And he could not explain himself to her. The prospect of being married and mated, breeding for as long as an alpha deemed fit, was much less frightening to Will than staying in Wolf Trap was.

"It's not from the count." he muttered, not wanting Abigail's sailor to overhear.

"It's from the master of Caraval."

"What?!" Abigail said, eyes widening. "Really? He wrote you back?"

"Shh! Someone might overhear you!" Will hissed as his sister took the letter.

"What, now I can't celebrate? You've been waiting ten years for this, Will." Abigail said, opening the envelope.

She removed the three slips of paper inside and held them up. In the lamplight, their seals glowed gold like the envelope for a minute before turning a dangerous, rich shade of blood, as if someone had donated the stuff in their veins of the ink. Abigail gasped as silver letters materialized, forming words on the first slip: *Admit One: Abigail Hobbs, Isle of Wolf Trap.*

Will's name appeared on the other.

And on the third, it merely said, *Admit One*. Will imagined that was for his fiancé. Like the other two, the words appeared above the name of an isle he had never heard of: Isle of Aukstaitija.

Will considered what the letter had said, about experiencing Caraval with his fiancé, and for the first time, he wondered if it would be a good way to get to know each other. It could be a good way to break the ice. It might even be romantic.

"Look, there's more!" Abigail said and, sure enough, more words were appearing across the bottom of each ticket.

To be used once to gain entrance to Caraval.

The main gates close at admit on the thirteenth day of the Growing Season, year 61. Anyone arriving later than this will be barred from playing or watching, and will not be eligible to win this year's prize of one wish.

Will's excitement died, leaving a metallic taste in his mouth like blood. It had been too much to hope for. Too much to hope that that he would actually get to experience Caraval. It would be much better if Caraval was in three months or even three weeks- Not three days. *Sometime* after he was married and mated, not before. Their father had been secretive about the exact date of the wedding, but Will knew it would not be in three days. Leaving before his was married was impossible- And dangerous.

"Three days." he muttered, worrying his lip between his teeth.

"Did you see the prize, Will? A wish!" Abigail said, rereading the words.

"I thought you didn't believe in wishes." Will pointed out.

"So? I thought you be happier than this. You've wanted this for ten years. People would kill to get their hands on these." Abigail said, looking him over.

"Did you, uh, miss the bit where it says we have to leave Wolf Trap? To make it in three days, we'd have to leave tomorrow." Will said, biting his lip again.

"Why do you think I'm so excited? I've always wanted to have an adventure. To leave home." Abigail said, voice dropping low with giddy excitement.

Will did, too. But as much as he wanted to have fun and experience magic, he had to get married even more.

When Abigail was happy, Will wanted to be happy, too. He could feel her happiness; he knew what it was like to be Abigail when she was happy. The world was bright and shimmery, and nothing was wrong. He wanted to share that, to agree with her, to let her keep his happiness.

But instead, he sharpened his voice, though he hated himself for crushing his sister's happiness. She had had so few reasons to be happy over the years.

"Do you remember what happened the last time we tried to leave Wolf Trap?" he asked harshly.

Abigail's smile faded, but then it returned, though perhaps a little smaller.

"We can handle it. It'll be fine, Will. It was two years ago." she said brightly.

She only said that because Will had kept the truth from her. She did not know the whole story, of what their father had truly done that night. Will had lied and kept to himself to protect, so she wouldn't live her life knowing there was an even darker side to their father, a side that she in particular had to look out for. He didn't want her to live in fear.

"Or... Are you afraid that this is going to interfere with you wedding?" Abigail demanded, smile fading, clutching the tickets tightly.

"Stop, you'll damage them." Will said, snatching them back.

"You're avoiding my question. Is this about your wedding?" Abigail asked, looking him up and down.

"No, it's about the part where it says we have to leave the island. We have no way to do that, and I have no idea where this place is. I've never even heard of the Isle of Aukstaitija. It's not part of the Conquered Isles." Will said, tapping the tickets against his thigh.

"I have." Hannibal said, stepping out from behind some barrels.

He smiled at them, but it was clear he was not apologetic in the slightest for eavesdropping on their conversation.

"The reason you have never heard of it is because it is not part of the Empire. Not even one of the Five Empires. the Isle of Aukstaitija is *Legend's* private island. No empire claims it." he explained, looking between them.

"It is only two days from here. If you like, I can smuggle you off Wolf Trap and take you there. For a price, of course." he continued, eyeing the third ticket.

Will recalled Abigail's words of people killing for the tickets and tightened his jaw. Hannibal had the charm that made omegas and women open their arms and spread their legs, but he had a Northern accent, and everyone knew the North was a lawless place, torn apart by thieves and criminals. There was no reason for him not to be one.

"We'll be in a lot of trouble if we leave." Will said, shoving the tickets in his pocket.

"And we'll be in trouble if we're caught down here with a boy, especially an alpha." Abigail countered.

Hannibal looked downright insulted at being called a boy- he had to be thirty-one- but Abigail continued before he could say anything.

"Everything we do is dangerous, Will. But you want this more than anyone. I know you. For years you have been wishing on every falling star that the next ship that arrives will hold Legend and his magical performers, so you can actually change your life. I know you still want that."

Caraval is the closest thing to magic you will find in this world. It's more than just a game or a performance. Nothing you hear will ever compare. Their grandmother's words echoed in Will's head and as a young man, he had been captivated by the stories she told of Caraval. He had wanted more than anything to experience the magic, to live his life as he saw fit for a few days, with no one and nothing to stop him from doing what he pleased. A wish would mean so many things. Freedom, choices, safety. But now, in his adulthood, Nana's stories seemed more like the ramblings of an old woman than anything else.

Beautiful and alluring, a complete fairytale.

And it was best to keep them that way.

Wishes and magic were as real as mermaids and unicorns. They were nice and fanciful, but not real or useful to dream after. Will had really stopped believing in magic a long time ago, had let the dreams wither. He had continued to right to legend because... Well, it had been hard to bring himself to stop. But the only person who could give him freedom, choices, and safety, for both himself and Abigail, was his mate-to-be, the count.

With the beautiful tickets hidden, the magic seemed to be gone with them. Will could feel the emotions of others like, well, magic, and he wanted to cling to Abigail's bright happiness, but now all he felt was the gray reality of his own.

"Abigail, it's just too risky. If we try to leave-" Will began, breaking off as footsteps sounded on the stop steps.

They were loud and mismatched, signaling more than one person, likely three, if not more.

Will cursed. Abigail shot a terrified glance at Hannibal and began to motion for him to hide behind the barrels, but before he could, a voice spoke.

"Don't leave because of me." Governor Garret Hobbs said, finishing his descent into the barrel room.

Behind him, three guards- Eldin, Able, and Elliot- took up their positions, silent and unnerving, their beta scents subtle. Governor Hobbs's alpha scent of cloves and plums turned Will's stomach, drowning out the immediate scents of the barrel room. He scented the air, knowing within seconds what Hannibal was.

He was a middle-aged man with heavily receded brown hair and scruffy facial hair similar to Will's own, but somehow his was neater, more fashion-leaning than Will's. He dressed neatly in a blue suit and wore tan gloves, a hunting knife sheathed on his belt. At least he still had the gloves on. That was Will's first thought.

He kept up the appearances of a civil governor and he approached Hannibal, who was looking him over in return. Hannibal was taller and somewhat broader, and honestly, a more intimidating alpha.

But that was how their father was. Loving and kind, until he wasn't.

He took in Hannibal's semi-worn navy coat, his brown pants that were tucked into knee-high leather boots that had seen better days, and his shirt that probably hadn't started out that creamish shade, though it was clear the sailor took care with his appearance.

Hobbs ignored his children in favor of the alpha in front of him.

"I don't think we've met. Governor Garret Jacob Hobbs." he said, offering his hand.

It spoke volumes that Hannibal did not hesitate and shook Hobbs's hand with his own ungloved hand without a moment of hesitation or an extra sniff at his scent.

"Hannibal Lecter." Hannibal said, giving Hobbs's hand a firm shake.

He tried to take his hand back, but Hobbs held on, and Hannibal's maroon eyes flashed subtly.

"Now, Hannibal, you must not be from Wolf Trap. Your accent, your name..."

"No, sir. I am a sailor, off *The Bella.*" Hannibal said, firmly taking his hand back.

"Thought so. We like sailors here in Wolf Trap. Good money is paid to dock here, and while here, the sailors and their passengers spend money, which helps the economy. Now tell me, how does the rum taste? I assume that is why were down here. Was it to your liking?" Hobbs said, glancing around.

"Yes, sir. It was." Hannibal said, his scent thickening and souring with a hint of nerves.

"And my children? Which one of them was to your liking?" Hobbs asked.

Will's heart iced over, and his own scent did the same as Hannibal's, running straight to fear.

"Don't lie to me. I can smell by your breath you haven't been sampling any rum, and you sure as hell didn't come down here to play cards or pray to your North gods." Hobbs said, his scent becoming spicier with anger and warning.

"Neither. I came down to sample the rum, and they caught me." Hannibal said smoothly, tempering his scent.

His eyes had widened with insult, as if he would never even think of doing such a dishonorable thing.

"He was with Will, Dad." Abigail said and Will's heart lurched.

"What? No! Father, it was Abby. She's lying." Will said and Abigail snorted.

"I caught them kissing behind the barrels." she said.

"No, it was Abigail." Will countered, desperate.

Abigail's face turned red.

"Will, stop lying. I caught you and lies won't change it."

"Father, she is the one who is lying. Do you really think I would do such a thing just weeks before my wedding?" Will said with a breathy laugh.

"I heard him say that he wanted to gain experience for his wedding night." Abigail said, glancing at Will.

"That's-"

"Enough of this!" Hobbs barked and they both closed their mouths.

He turned to Hannibal, whose hand he still grasped.

"My children have the bad habit of lying about which of them has done something. Now, can you tell me which one of them is so we can end this?" he said, his scent turning dangerous.

"You have made a mistake, Governor. I did not lay a finger on either of them." Hannibal said, tugging at his hand again.

"I don't make mistakes, especially when my children are involved. You'll save them both a lot of trouble if you just tell the truth." Hobbs snapped.

Abigail caught Hannibal's attention with a sharp shake of her head and mouthed, *Will.*

Will tried to catch Hannibal's attention, to let him know the mistake he was making, but he couldn't.

"It was Will." Hannibal said, looking steadily at Hobbs.

He was so foolish! He probably thought he was doing Abigail a favor, when he was doing the exact opposite.

"I've warned you about things like this, William, and you never learn." Hobbs sighed, releasing Hannibal.

Swallowing, Will tried to intervene.

"Father, it was only a very quick kiss. I didn't want to disappoint the count with my inexperience." he tried, letting meek omega notes saturate his scent.

Governor Hobbs was a loving father... Up until the moment he wasn't.

Will slid in front of Abigail, but Able grabbed him, holding him fast. Will snarled and fought, but Able was accustomed to holding him, and he couldn't get free. He couldn't protect his sister. This was what their father did to punish them: He did something to the other, knowing it pained them more to cause the other to get hurt than for him to cause them direct pain.

He pulled off his gloves and twisted the two rings he wore- both wedding rings, one set with a large amethyst and the other a pointed blue diamond- around, gently cupping Abigail's face.

"I'm sorry, Abby." he said, glancing at Will regretfully.

"No!" Will screamed- A mistake he knew better than to make.

Hobbs stuck Abigail once.

"For lying." he said, then struck her again for Will's scream.

The second blow was harder than the first and Abigail fell to the floor, tears in her eyes, but she didn't make a noise. Blood ran down her face. Hobbs knelt and stroked her hair, kissing her forehead and murmuring an apology.

Hannibal looked stricken and his eyes flashed again, Will seeing him bare his teeth ever so slightly. Will wanted to do the same, but he couldn't, or Abigail would be punished more. Hobbs rose and cleaned the blood off his hand with a handkerchief he pulled from his pocket. He seemed to grow in height, while Will felt shrunken.

"Don't disappoint me again, Will." Hobbs said, looking at him.

"I won't, Father. I made a foolish mistake." Will choked out, as he knew was expected.

He was released and he landed on the floor, his heart twisting.

That sentence was true, at least. He might not have been the one that Hannibal had been *tasting*, but Abigail had still paid the price. He had failed once again to protect his sister.

"I hope you won't. I would hate for you to tear our family apart with foolish notions." Hobbs said, pulling his gloves back on.

"Now, I probably shouldn't give you this, but maybe it will help remind you of everything you have to lose." he continued.

Then he reached into the pocket of his shirt and removed a folded letter, offering to Will, who still knelt on the floor. Will took it with a shaking hand.

"It's a letter from the count. Your wedding is ten days from today, on the twentieth. If I catch you trying to run off or giving yourself to a strang alpha, or you do anything else that would disrupt these plans, more than your sister's face will bleed."

Chapter End Notes

Okay, I know Hobbs was VERY out of character, but I needed him to be the bad guy here, and the dude barely spoke in the show, so this is what I have. I've hinted at some things in here and you're welcome to guess at them, but I might not directly answer if it contains spoilers, unless you truly want them.

I usually prefer alpha Will and omega Hannibal, but for this story it had to be the other way around. And yes, before anyone gets on me about it, I don't approve of Hannibal/Abigail or Will/Abigail, but there will be more behind what the two were doing in the barrel room in later chapters. Everyone is 18+, so it's fine.

And how Will and Abigail are exactly siblings will be explained in the next few chapters, I promise.

As always, kudos and comments are welcome. They make my day!

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Will makes a decision.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to everyone who has commented so far! I'm glad you're enjoying the story. This took me a lot longer to get written than I should have, but, oh well. Sometimes I just don't feel like writing.

And here's a basic playlist for the fic in general: Carousel by Melanie Martinez

As always, polite questions and comments are welcome, no matter how long after posting!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Their father's scent still hung in the air, thick with warning and anger. It turned Will's stomach and lingered as he sat with Abigail, waiting for a maid to bring clean bandages and medicinal supplies.

"You should have let me tell the truth. He wouldn't have hurt me as badly, not with my wedding in ten days." Will told his sister, reaching out his hands before pulling them back.

He hated to see Abigail hurting, but it was also sometimes hard to touch her, *especially* when she was hurting. What amount of words or touch could fix this?

"He wouldn't have marked your face, but he still would have done something cruel. Broken your finger so you couldn't finish your wedding quilt or something like that." Abigail said with a shake of her head, touching her face.

It was now a dark purple color, like their father's jeweled rings, and the blood was bright against it.

"Heh. That's as finished as it's ever going to be." Will said, trying to cheer his sister up, but he felt hollow inside.

"It was my fault, Will. I deserved it." Abigail said, twisting her hands in her lap.

"No one such a thing." Hannibal said, speaking for the first time since their father had left.

His scent with thick with anger too, but different, and Will was alarmed at the hints of protectiveness in it.

"I-"

"Don't apologize. Apologies don't fix wounds." Will growled, baring his teeth, his omega fangs smaller than an alpha's but more deadly, too.

"I was not going to apologize. I was going to change my offer about taking you both from here." Hannibal corrected, coming to join them.

He dropped into a crouch so he wasn't towering over them, injecting soothing alpha notes meant to calm omegas into his scent, showing he wasn't a threat.

"I will do it for free. No one deserves to live in such fear or threat. If you change your minds, my ship leaves at dawn. Come find me before then and I will take you from here, no questions asked. No payment needed." he continued, reaching for Abigail.

He gently tipped her head up and examined her wounds, expression calculating, and Will hissed.

"Don't touch her." he warned.

"I was merely trying-"

"I can take care of my sister myself. We don't need your help." Will snapped and Hannibal straightened.

He did not look offended. In fact, he looked a little sad.

"I will wait for you as long as I can." he told them, and left.

Neither of them spoke until his footsteps had faded on the stairs.

"No. No, Abigail. Things will be much worse when we get back." Will said, seeing the look on his sister's face.

"I don't plan on getting caught." Abigail said, pulling her hand away from her face.

Her eyes were wet but glinting in a way that reminded Will too much of their father somtimes. He could see that her mind was already made up, and he knew there was very little to be done about it. He could tell that Hannibal was a means to an end for his sister, given the way she had ignored him when he had left. He was a means to get off Wolf Trap, to escape and go anywhere else. Abigail had always wanted to leave, more so than Will had. She had dreams that were too big to be contained on the island. And that was the danger.

Their father would only let them go by his say and his say only. Will had been shocked when he had been told his marriage had been arranged. Shocked that his father was willing to let him go enough for it to happen. And even more shocked that Abigail was allowed to go with him. Part of him didn't trust it, but he did not have a choice.

"You should come to, Will. I know you think your marriage will save you, save us both, but what if the count is as bad as Dad, or worse?" Abigail said, looking him over.

"I have to trust that he isn't." Will murmured, sucking in a heavy breath.

"Abby, if you just read his letters, you would see that he's kind. He wants to take care of you, too. If I have to give him two dozen pups for that to happen, so be it. So long as we're both safe, it's a risk I'm willing to take." he continued.

"Oh, Will." Abigail said, smiling.

It was the sort of smile that people smiled when they said something they didn't want to, when they were breaking through an illusion someone had conjured up.

"If he's so wonderful, then why has he only told you his title and not his name? Not told you where he lives other than the capital?" she asked him sadly.

"That isn't his fault. It's Father's. Another way to try to control us." Will said, pulling out the note and holding it so they could both see.

The 3rd of the Growing Season, Year 61

My dearest Will,

Your father has informed me our marriage and mating will soon be upon us, as the last of the details have been sorted out. He has wanted to keep the date a surprise, but I have asked him to pass along the information and this note, as I believe seeing each other for the first time will be surprise enough. From what I have been told of you, it will be a very welcome one on my part.

I know you are nervous. I know you may not be like other omegas, but I do not care about that. A typical omega would never do. Never be afraid to be yourself in front of me. I will do my best to ease your fears and show you my true self in turn.

As we speak, my servants are preparing a guest suite for your sister. I have convinced your father to allow her stay with us for at least a year after the wedding. She will have better prospects for marriage, even if she is a beta, here in Valenda-

The rest of his groom's were missing, cut off by a violent tear in the page. Their father had also been kind enough to remove any trace of the wax seal bearing the count's crest, further obscuring any hint of who Will would soon be married to.

Another part of his twisted game. Will thought, touching the tattered edge regretfully.

It felt like they lived in a dome or a cage, one that encompassed all of Wolf Trap. Governor Hobbs was the wealthiest official in the Conquered Isles, from his rum trade and other black market dealings. His initial wealth had been made by building and inventing a genius system to carry heated water to waiting pools and tubs without maids having to lug it up many flights

up steps. This marriage would be the final move on his gameboard, bringing him everything he desired.

He had two heirs, had claimed two omegas, and had made trade flourish for all four isles. But no matter how wealthy he was or what inventions he might make, he would never have the respect of the other nobles of the Empire, merely because he governed Wolf Trap.

Though all four Isles had been part of the Empire for more than seventy years, the rest of the world still viewed them as poor, uncouth, and not worth acknowledging. It grated on their father that they were viewed this way, and there was further shame in the fact that his only children were an omega and a beta. No alpha to carry on his legacy. Another reason for the marriage- He was convinced marrying Will off to a wealthy, well-bred alpha and having him produce alpha grandchildren would finally bring him all the respect and standing he wanted.

"This proves nothing, Will." Abigail said, looking at the letter.

"It shows that he is kind and-"

"You and I both know people can sound however they want on paper. This count is probably as bad as Dad and writing flowery things because he thinks you're a weak omega. Just like Dad tells you are. Which you aren't." Abigail said, toying with the edge of the paper.

Will snatched it back. He knew Abigail was right; he had thought the same thing himself. But if this alpha wasn't kind, why would he have insisted on writing Will so many letters and reassured him? Why would he promise to take Abigail with them? He likely knew Will had no choice in the marriage, so there was no point in tricking him.

But to Will, the risk was worth taking. It would get them beyond their father's obsessive reach. This life probably wouldn't be everything he hoped. He might have a cold marriage and only be used for producing children; some omegas were pregnant for years. He might have a kind mate, but they might never love each other. And yes- Maybe the count would be like their father. But the chance to escape was worth it, and not worth risking everything for the possibility of winning a wish at Caraval- Especially with their father's threat hanging in the air.

More than your sister's face will bleed.

Will wanted to choke on those words, a coppery taste coating his tongue as they crossed his mind. He had seen the way their father looked at Abigail. He knew he never wanted to let them go. They had to leave here, now. And this marriage was the safest- and only- option. No matter what it meant for Will in the future.

"I would rather die than live trapped under Dad forever, Will, or locked up on your count's estate." Abigail said firmly.

"You don't mean that." Will said, shocked.

Abigail had been getting bolder lately. She had always been bold, in ways, but in recent months she had started making such declarations and Will hated them. He knew Abigail felt

trapped, as trapped as he was, if not more. But he hated to hear those words.

Will also thought that, in all her fantasies of leaving Wolf Trap, Abigail had forgotten just how dangerous the outside world might be. In their nana's stories, she had also warned them the dangers that awaited young women and young omegas if they were careless or didn't have any resources of any sort when they went out in the world.

Some were tricked by young men and alphas, thinking they had found someone to love them, only to be trapped in a marriage endlessly producing children or sold off into a brothel or finding themselves at auction. The luck ones ended up in workhouses, in deplorable conditions.

"You worry too much, Will." Abigail said and climbed to her feet.

"What are you doing?" Will asked, rising with her.

"I'm not going to sit around and wait for a maid to bring things just so you can patch me up again and tell me to spend the rest of the day in bed. I'm tired of it, Will." Abigail replied, scooping up her scarf.

Instead of binding it around her throat, she draped it over her head, using its edge to conceal her injuries.

"If I'm going with Hannibal tomorrow, I need to get ready. And I need to let him know I'm actually coming." she said.

"Abby, wait!" Will exclaimed, snatching for her arm.

She raced away from him and he ran after her, but she evaded him again, taking off down the corridors.

Will was fast, but Abigail was faster.

The air was thick with summer humidity and the scent of the nearby woods was replaced with a pungent, salty scent, meaning someone had likely brought in a recent catch of fish. Will ran after his sister, weaving his way through the various corridors.

Their father never felt like his estate was large enough. It was far off from town, so it had more land than most, and he was constantly building. More guestrooms. More gardens. More hidden rooms and passages for all his illegal dealings. Recently, a wing he said was for Will and his future mate when they visited, along with any members of their household they brought and future grandchildren.

Will and Abigail were not allowed to roam these newer parts, and if their father caught them, especially running around like little children, he would probably punish them. But any punishment was nothing compared to what he would do if he caught Abigail trying to leave.

The morning mist had not burned off yet and it flowed through every window and breezeway, obscuring Will's view, and the echo of his own footsteps and Abigail's distorted each other, making it hard to locate her. He followed her honeysuckle scent, but she raced through a

garden, disguising it in the other sweet-smelling blooms and making him growl. Then he caught a sliver of blue dress, heading up toward the hill or rather, the building on the top- The priets' confessional. It was crafted of white stone that gleamed in the sunlight and could be seen from faraway; Governor Hobbs liked everyone to think that he was a pious man, when in truth, he would never confess any of his sins to anyone. This made it the one part of the estate where he rarely ventured, and perfect for doing things he would never find out about- Like smuggling covert letters.

Will sprinted up the path, the stones damp with the mist, and he had almost caught up to his sister near the top of the hill, where a little courtyard filled with white flowers and trellises led to the large wooden doors of the confessional.

"Abigail, if you don't stop this instant, I'll tell Father your plans!" Will barked, pausing before Abigail could disappear.

The figure froze immediately. Then it was Will's turn to freeze as the sunlight poured from behind the clouds and burned through the mist, the girl turning. It wasn't Abigail. It was a novice, dressed in blue, and with her white head covering, she had only looked like Abigail.

They stared at each other and Will pressed a hand to his mouth to cover his unomega-like show of teeth. He had to give his sister credit; she had always been good at evading him when she ran from him. He imagined she was elsewhere on the estate now, pilfering supplies and preparing for her journey.

But Will couldn't let her go. Not like their father couldn't, but because of their father. Not when Will's impending marriage could save them both- Or destroy them, if it didn't happen. Abigail would hate him for it for a bit, but Will was doing the right thing. It was the only way left to him to protect his sister, and he knew deep in his heart that he was swiftly running out of time.

He gave the novice an awkward smile and followed her into the confessional. It was tall and round and always quiet, so quiet that Will swore he could hear the candles flickering. White, tall, and dripping, they lined the stone walls and illuminated paintings of various states in different states of agony, the flickering light making it look as though the hideous scenes were alive. The air smelled of wax, dry paper, dust, and long-dead flowers, making Will curl his lip and want to sneeze as he walked past the pews.

Ten years ago, when his dad had died, was the first time Will had ever set foot in here. Abigail hadn't stepped foot here until two years ago, when her mother had died. Will hadn't even known that, to confess, a person wrote their sins on a piece of paper and gave it to the priest, who then burned it in a ritual of cleansing and confessing to the gods. Neither of them were religious, nor had any of their parents been. But after his dad had died, Will had had nowhere else to turn, and had prayed to the gods to return him to him. It was the only thing he could think to do. And after her mother had died, Abigail had joined him, seeking answers and solace herself.

Of course, their pleas for the return of their lost parents had never been answered, but the priests weren't entirely unhelpful: Will and then Abigail had soon discovered they were very discreet about delivering covert messages. He also thought they might have pitied them.

Picking up a piece of sin paper, Will wrote a quick note, mimicking his sister's handwriting from memory- Not the first time he had done it.

I need to see you.

Meet me on the Black Shore tonight.

One hour past midnight.

He signed it with a looping shape that resembled a cross between an *A* and a heart, not signing it, though he addressed it. Then he passed the priest a generous donation and left.

Abigail would hate him. But he had to protect her. He just hoped this would be enough.

Chapter End Notes

You guys are free to guess at who the count is, if you like, but I probably won't answer unless you insist that you don't mind the spoiler. I might reveal, just in case I think I need to tag the relationship.

Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Will tries to protect his sister.

Chapter Notes

Okay, wow, I wrote this one in an hour and a half and it's fresh off the press!

TW/CW: Mentioned cannibalism, shown flashback to character death, mentions of more, and non-consensual drug use.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Will had been a child, he had always been drawn to the water. His dad had loved to fish and Will had loved to fish too, but his father hadn't liked them going down to the shore.

Now, looking back, Will knew that was because Governor Hobbs had been worried about them leaving. But back then, he had played it as an issue of worry, that he feared for Will and Johnathan's safety with the waves and the sea creatures and such. It was a lie and Johnathan had ignored it half the time; he had loved to fish and passed that love on to Will.

Will preferred the freshwater on Wolf Trap, but every once and a while, he and his dad had gone down to the sea. They would be secretive about it and to little Will, it had seemed like a wonderful adventure, but now he realized just how much his dad must have risked to take him down to the shore.

But even back then, the glittering, dark sands of the Black Shore had been a forbidden place, and Will hadn't ventured there when he was little. Hobbs had told him one day that the black sand wasn't sand but the burned, ground bones of the wolves Wolf Trap had been named after, the horror of it both intriguing and horrifying Will. He had never told his dad the lie and had refused to go near, but as he grew, he had obviously realized it was a lie.

One of the daughters of his father's guards, Elise, had told him the truth one day, that it was just volcanic sand, and given him a handful to see. He had looked at the alpha girl and let it run through his fingers, pouring it into Abigail's hand after confirming that it was, indeed, sand. His little sister had squealed with delight and had, ever since, raced off to the Black Shore whenever she got the chance.

Now, as he walked under the fractured light of the full, cloud-cloaked moon spilling eerie light down on the glorious dark sand, Will thought back to the lie, his boots pressing obvious tracks into the grains. To his left, the beach stretched out into black rocks, looking like the teeth or antlers of some beast in the darkness, and to the right, a broken, ancient dock stuck out like its tongue. It was the kind of night where you could taste the silvery, inky texture of the night and smell the moon, candle wax growing cold after the flame had been blown out.

He also thought of the precious tickets tucked into his pocket, feeling as though they were smoldering, and remembered how they had looked in the sunlight, then the lantern light. He wondered what they would look like in the moonlight, but he didn't pull them out now. He thought of the mouth-watering, heart-stopping promise of escape they held, but quickly pushed it away.

They had attempted to leave only once before. And it hadn't ended well.

Elise had booked them passage on a schooner two years ago.

Will had been desperate, and that desperation had made him stupid. But he had seen his father looking at Abigail, looking at them both, had paid attention to the news going around Wolf Trap of the girls disappearing, and put the clues together. It had been on this beach, actually. They had only made it onto the plank of the ship, but it had been too far for their father. Elliot had gotten too rough with Abigial when he had been pulling her off and had knocked her unconscious. Hobbs had sent all the guards but Abel back to the estate with Abigail, and Will had been forced to stand on the black sands and watch as his father punished Elise.

He should have been the one who had drowned that night. He should have been punished. He had opened up to Elise and she had brought him a solution, which he had foolishly accepted. Instead, he had been restrained- Abel had broken his arm- and forced to watch as his father had taken Elise into the sparkling pool tidal pools and forced her head under, killing her quickly. Later, people had thought Elise had run off with a sailor omega she had been eyeing and joked that she wanted to claim and mate. Only Will knew the truth.

Only Will knew what had come after.

Garret Jacob Hobbs loved to hunt. He took Will and Abigail hunting all the time, so no one had questioned when he and Will had come back with fresh meat after the 'hunting trip' he had taken Will on after the Black Shore.

After the killing, after the butchering, Governor Hobbs had turned to Will and kissed his forehead, but the look in his eyes was dark and deadly, a monster Will had never seen before. The murder and what came next was the final string being snapped in a rope that had been fraying with each hit, each hurtful word, and everything else. That was the moment he had stopped being any sort of parent to Will.

"I love you, Will. You and your sister both. But if you ever try that again, your sister will suffer the same fate. I won't be able to stop myself. Do you understand?" he said, the bloody hunting knife grasped in his hand.

"Yes, Father." Will had said, terror beginning to form an armor around his heart.

"Good boy." his father had said and kissed his forehead.

Will could still taste the strange flavor of the meat on his tongue that Abigail did not seem to have noticed. And only he had noticed the other girls who had passed through or gone 'missing' over the past two years, girls who looked eerily like his sister. Their names ran through his head. Some of them, he didn't know their first name, only the letter, but they were still burned into his brain.

Elise Nichols, S. Olsen, L. Sorenson, D. Latimer, P. Cohen, R. Winn, A. Anderson, D. Woodward.

And... He has also noticed the occasional boy who had vanished as well, who looked like him.

All eaten by the Hobbs family, no one suspecting a thing. Because their father could never let them go. The moment they had tried, he had begun to kill. If they tried to leave again, Will knew his little sister would be next on the list. That a surrogate would no longer be enough.

Their father was loving. But he loved them too much.

Will would never tell Abigail the truth. Nor would he tell her what lurked deep inside him, something he constantly tried to bury or drown, or shoot or strangle. He let her think he had become extremely overprotective. Let her think what she would of his behavior changing even more than it had after the death of his dad, and then her mother. But only he knew they could not leave Wolf Trap until he had a husband who could sweep them away from all this.

Waves slapped against the shore, muffling the sound of footsteps, their salty tang obscuring scents, but Will heard the footsteps and smelled musk and blood.

"You were not the Hobbs I was expecting." Hannibal said mildly as Will turned to face him.

"Graham. Just Graham." Will corrected automatically.

He had abandoned his father's name after Hobbs had first laid a finger on Abigail. He accepted only his dad's name, and no longer signed 'Hobbs-Graham' on anything, not even letters to the count. A bold thing for an omega to do.

He looked at Hannibal in the moonlight, thinking he looked more like a pirate than sailor in the moonlight, the kind that whisked off women and omegas from ships and eventually made them their brides. His long coat was dyed an inky black in the darkness, a belt held a knife around his hips. The moonlight threw his cheekbones in sharp relief, making them look as sharp as knife blades.

Will swallowed. He was now debating about the wisdom of meeting a strange alpha on a secluded strip of beach so late at night. He had been warned all his life of what happened to omegas who got put themselves into perilous situations with alphas, some of whom took first

and claimed later. This was exactly the sort of reckless, dangerous behavior he had come to expect from Abigail.

"Have you come to accept my offer, Mr. Graham?" Hannibal asked, looking him over. He maintained his distance, a hand in the pocket of his coat.

"No, but I have a counteroffer for you."

Raising his chin and steadying his scent, Will reached into his pocket and pulled out the tickets to Caraval. His fingers didn't want to release them, but he had to. When he had gotten back to the estate, he had found his room had been ransacked. The mess had been so thorough he still had no idea what was missing, but he knew Abigail had gone it, preparing for this ill-fated voyage.

"They're yours. Use them or sell them, as long as you leave early and without Abigail." Will said, thrusting them at Hannibal, breaching the space between them.

"It is a bribe, then." Hannibal said, taking Will's wrist delicately between his fingers.

He turned Will's hand this way and that, making the tickets look as though they had been penned in blood and liquid jewels, and Will's heart skipped a beat at the alpha's abrupt yet gentle touch.

Will hated that word; it reminded him too much of what his father had become. He truly did not want to give away the tangible chance to have the only thing he still dreamed off. But to protect his sister, he would have carved out his own heart if it meant she would be safe.

"My sister is reckless. She wants adventure, to get away, to see the world. She doesn't know how dangerous that is. If our father catches her, he will do worse than what he did this morning." Will said, not flinching from the alpha.

"And you believe that she will be safe if she stays here?" Hannibal asked, lifting a brow.

"Safer than if she tries to leave. I'm going to take her with me when I marry; my mate-to-be as already agreed and made arrangements."

"Does she wish to go with you, Mr. Graham?"

"She'll thank me for it later."

"That is very different from what she said to be earlier this evening." Hannibal said, smiling the smile of cat who had caught its prey.

Will's warning instincts kicked in too late. He heard more footsteps and smelled honeysuckle behind him, twisting and looking over his shoulder. Abigail stood a few feet behind him, wearing a dark cloak over her clothes, making it look as though she had emerged from the darkness and the blackness of the shore.

"I'm sorry, Will, but you're the one who has taught me how important it is to protect your sibling." Abigail said, looking at him sadly.

Hannibal's hand suddenly tightened on Will's wrist and before Will could fight or bite- he would take a piece of the alpha with him if he had to- a needle slid into the vein of the wrist the alpha was holding. Cold liquid flooded his vein and it took effect almost immediately. Will's vision began to go in and out of focus, his hold on his body falling as the drug pumped through him with each beat of his frantic heart.

Hannibal caught him as he tottered, but then he was just falling

Falling

Falling

Falling

Chapter End Notes

Not me, using the story's opportunities to slip in some scenes resembling Potage and Dolce.

You guys might have noticed I switched Elise's age around. Also, it might not have been clear, but Hobbs was married to both Will's dad and Abigail's mom at the same time. Haven't had the chance to explain that yet and I don't know when I will, so I'm just adding that here. Very old-fashioned thing to do, having more than one omega in this day and age in the story, but happens among the nobles and stuff.

As always, polite questions and comments are welcomed no matter how long after posting, and so are kudos. These things are how writers power up for more writing!

Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Will's dreams.

Chapter Notes

Again, posted right after writing most of it. Still no beta, so thanks for everyone for not calling me out on my screw-ups with the English language (my first and only, even if it might not look like it. 😅).

Thanks for reading and commenting, everyone!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Before Will lost complete conscious, he looked up into the blurring, spinning space above him and saw maroon eyes, smelled honeysuckle as a gentle hand stroked his forehead.

"I'm really sorry, Will. But this is for the best..."

Then he fell completely into the darkness, plunging into like a dive into night-darkened waters, and the words ushered him into a place that could only be touched in the deepest, most lucid dreams.

He saw himself again, shortly after the death of his dad. He was curled in bed with a small Abigail, their nana sitting in a chair nearby. She was, technically speaking, Will's nana, or not really his at all, depending on how you looked at it. She had adopted his dad when he was a young child, as she was an omega who could not bear her own children. She had treated both Will and Abigail as her grandchildren, however, just as Will's dad and Abigail's mother had treated both as their own.

It was a distant, strange memory. She had spent more time with them after his dad had died, but Will had been too old to be tucked in, and Abigail's mother, Lousia, had usually put Abigail to bed.

Bella Crawford had been a beautiful woman. Will had always felt intimidated by her, as well as by his grandfather, Jack. She had been a regal-looking lady, her hair always carefully pulled back or pinned in place, her clothes neat and without a wrinkle. She had preferred wearing black or white or both, but Will knew her favorite color had been purple. She had

been wearing purple that night, amethysts coiled around her throat, matching bracelets sliding on her arms.

She had sat beside the bed and the chair might as well have been a throne, to young Will's eyes. She was an omega, like him, but so strange. She had a boldness to her that Will wished he could express, a freedom and a strength Will did not possess. His dad had been gentle and soft, Abigail's mother submissive and much the same, and his father had always told him he was delicate and gentle, not ferocious or brave or strong like an alpha. He was an omega, so he was like other omegas.

Bella's hand smoothed over Abigail's forehead, giving Will clarity to the memory. Abigail had been sick. He had curled in the bed with her, heedless of getting sick himself, trying to give her the comfort she pleaded from him. Bella had been sitting up with them to give Lousia some rest.

"Can you tell us a story, Nana?" Abigail asked.

Will nodded his agreement. He had loved their nana's stories.

"I want to hear about Master Legend. I want to know how he got his name." Abigail continued, snuggling closer to Will.

"All right. But if you want a story, you need to settle down." Bella said, smiling at them.

She cleared her throat, smoothed her skirts, and began.

"Legend was born into the Visconti family. They were a family of actors, performers, and play writes. All of them alphas. Unfortunately, most of them were talentless. Their saving grace was that all of them were beautiful, and it is said that one son, Legend, was the most beautiful of all."

"Legend isn't his real name." Will protested.

"I can't tell you his real name." Bella said, shaking her head at him.

"No one knows it. But like all great- and terrible- stories, Legend's begins with love. Love for an omega named Phyllis. She did to him what he had done to countless omegas before her- Bewitched and charmed with her looks and pretty words and kisses. She told him things he should have known better than to believe."

Here, she paused for effect, and Abigail's eyes widened, her small fists gripping the blanket tightly. Will gazed out the window, paying attention, turning the scenes over in his mind.

"Now, the Visconti family was not well-off anymore at this point. Their fortune squandered and stolen. Legend lived off his looks and stolen hearts, and his talents with the arts. Phyllis claimed it was enough for her. But her father, a wealthy merchant, would never allow her to marry an alpha so far beneath her."

"Did they get married?" Abigail asked eagerly.

"You will never know if you keep interrupting." Bella said, lifting an elegant brow at her.

Abigail grinned guiltily.

Will watched as a cloud drifted across the moon, throwing the room into shadows only punctured by the flickering candle flames and the fire behind the screen, snow glistening on the land of Wolf Trap. He was creating images in his head, thinking of Legend and Phyllis and her father.

"Now, Legend had a plan. The empress was about to be crowned ruler of the Empire, and Legend was convinced that if he could perform at her coronation, he would gain the wealth and fame he needed to wed Phyllis. Only, he was shamefully turned away because it was claimed he was not talented enough." Bella continued.

"I would have let him in." Abigail said immediately.

"I'm not sure I would." Will said, trying to sound reasonable, but he would have and he knew it.

Bella frowned at them severely. "If you two do not stop interrupting, I am not going to finish the story. And remember, this was before Legend was Legend. He was a poor performer with no talent or magic then."

Will and Abigail quieted immediately.

"He had no magic then, but he believed stories his mother and father had passed down to him. He had heard that each person in the world gets one wish- just one- if they want something with all their heart and soul, and they have a little magic to help them along. So he sought out a woman with knowledge of the magical arts." Bella said, Will closing his eyes.

"She means a witch." he murmured.

Behind his eyes, a flash of gold swung across his vision, and he found himself standing in a cabin, its wooden walls and ceiling stretching high above him. Candles sprouted upside-down from the ceiling, pouring smoke in the wrong direction, the wax falling upward to the ceiling. In the center of the room a woman stood, dressed darkly, her hair red as fury and blood. Before her stood a young man, all sharp lines and dark clothes wrapped in shadows, concealing him, but Will knew by the top hat this was Legend.

"The woman asked what he wanted most, and Legend told her he wanted to lead the greatest troupe of performers and players the world had ever seen, so he could host amazing performances and games and win Phyllis's hand. But the woman warned him that he could not have both things. He would have to pick one and lose the other." Bella went on, her voice lowering.

"Legend laughed in her face. He believed he could have both. He told himself if he gained fame and wealth, designed the elaborate games in his head, that he would be able to win Phyllis. So he wished for that. He got exactly what he wished for. He wanted to create what he saw in his head. Something dark. Magical."

In Will's head, the candles flared as one, then blew out. Only the dim fire behind the woman remained and he could no longer see their faces, but he could swear something had changed with Legend in that moment. It was as if he had acquired an extra shadow, another layer to him, like another set of clothing or a second skin settling over him. The golden flash brought him back to the room.

"The woman told him his performances and games would be all that he envisioned. That they would be transcendent, blending magic and realty until the two were impossible to separate. But she also warned him that all magic, even wishes, came with a price. The more he performed, the more he would become whatever role he played. If he chose to play the hero, he would be more heroic. But if chose to be a villain, he would become a villain."

"So does that mean he's a villain?" Abigail demanded sleepily.

"What happened to Phyllis?" Will asked.

Bella sighed, brushing some invisible speck of dust off her skirt, finger tracing her wedding ring.

"The witch was right when she said he could not have both Phyllis and the magic he desired. After his wish came true, he transformed. He was no longer the boy Phyllis had fallen in love with, so she married another and broke his heart. He became just as famous and powerful as he had dreamed, but he claimed that Phyllis had betrayed him and he would never love again. Some would say his power makes him a villain, as he so often plays. Others would say that is makes him closer to a god."

As the story wrapped up, Abigail was more than halfway to sleep. Her mouth curved a little at the mention of a handsome, powerful villain. Will, however, remained awake, his eyes gleaming at the thought of magic, of the games and wonderous performances. And maybe, also, at the thoughts of the hint of darkness wrapped up it in all.

Chapter End Notes

I wanted to add Bella and Jack into this, but this was the only way that I could. I also sort of like the image of a grandma Bella. Things will start to pick up soon, hopefully.

Again, feel free to ask questions and politely comment (and leave kudos too)!

Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Will takes a gamble.

Chapter Notes

Thank you to all the commenters and people who are enjoying this story! Again, this is freshly written, so there might be some typos. Still flying without a beta or a reread, so that's on me.

And I am aware that I got Abigail's mom's name wrong, which is fixed in this chapter, and that I spelled Abel wrong in another. If I get name wrong again, feel free to point it out. Screwing up names is my most hated typo.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Will woke up with the feeling that he had lost something incredibly important, something he could not afford to lose. A man plagued by nightmares, he often woke up in a flash and panic, disoriented and sweating, panting hard. He woke up quickly now, though there was no sweating or panting. There was definitely a feeling of panic and being disoriented, however, as the world rocked beneath him.

"Careful." Hannibal said, reaching out and steadying Will before he could stand up in the boat- If you could call it that.

The boat he and his dad had sometimes taken out on the lake in Wolf Trap had been bigger than this. There was barely room for the two of them. Hannibal was rowing strongly, being careful not to splash, and the sea around them was unfamiliar, colored pink and turquoise as the sun rose in a copper-gold disk in the sky.

"How long was I drugged?" Will demanded, glaring at the alpha.

Hannibal did not reply, but Will made his observations quickly. Dawn was coming, but more than one had likely passed since the needle had slid into his vein. The alpha had been clean-shaven when Will had met him, but now his face was darkened by stubble, likely a few days' worth. Will's temper flared.

"You stupid bastard!" Will growled, slamming his fist into the alpha's jaw.

He froze immediately as Hannibal caught himself, shocked with himself. He had trouble controlling his tongue sometimes and his moods, but he had never physically hurt someone like this before, except when Hobbs had started hitting. Once, Will had smacked him back. Abigail had bled a lot for that. Will braced himself for the retaliation as Hannibal rubbed his jaw, his lip bleeding a bright crimson.

The alpha stared at him.

"I would never hit an omega, Will. Not unless they intended to do me serious harm, which you do not. You have nothing to fear from me." Hannibal said in a reassuring tone.

Unlike the come-hither look he had worn in the barrel room or the predatory smile on the beach, his expression was not seductive or charming. He simply looked... Like a normal human, but Will caught the ghost of the expression he had worn when Hobbs had hit Abigail. And his scent... It was not angry. In fact, it was steady and calm, the look in those maroon eyes one of admiration.

Will calmed. Not everyone was like Hobbs. Over the years, his perception of people had changed, he realized, and he didn't like it. He released his clenched fists.

"Sorry. I just, uh, reacted. But you and Abigail shouldn't have-" Will started, breaking off as that feeling of losing something flooded back.

And that something was a beta with auburn hair and a longing for adventure.

"Wait. Where's Abigail?" he demanded, zeroing back in on the alpha.

Hannibal dipped one oar a little deeper in the water, and this time he did splash Will, just a little.

Will bared his teeth.

"If you've done something, I will kill you with my bare-"

"Please calm down, William."

"Will."

"Will. I did not do a thing to your sister. You will find her on the isle, safe and sound." Hannibal said calmly, tipping his chin toward their destination.

Will was prepared to keep arguing, but he paused as he saw where Hannibal was gesturing.

The isle on the horizon looked nothing like his home. Wolf Trap had black rocks, black sands, sturdy oaks and poplars, overgrown fields that were being cleared for farming. In all, scruffy-looking and plain. This island was lush and vibrant. Silvery mist hung like veils around mountains- all covered in trees- that rose to the sky like emerald fangs. He could see the glint of a waterfall from the largest peak, shining like a necklace in the morning light. There were thick forests and foothills and open meadows, and it looked huge.

Isle of Austaitija.

Will had never heard of the isle before it had appeared on the tickets, but he knew without asking that this was where he was now. *Legend's private island.*

"You are fortunate to have slept the entire way here. The rest of the journey was not quite as scenic." Hannibal said as if he done him a favor.

Yet no matter how wonderous the isle seemed, another thought weighed on Will's mind.

"How far are we from Wolf Trap?" he asked.

"We are currently somewhere between the Conquered Isle and the Southern Empire." Hannibal answered conversationally, as if they were strolling through the gardens of Hobbs's estate.

This was the furthest Will had ever been from home. Actually, even sailing half a horizon away from Wolf Trap would have been the furthest. It was a strange feeling.

"What is today?" he asked, his stomach twisting.

"It is the thirteenth. Now, before you hit me again, Mr. Graham, I want to assure you that your sister bought you time. She made it appear as if you had both been kidnapped. Five ships left the day we did, and three the night you met me on the beach."

Will recalled the mess his room had been, which he had never found the energy to clean up.

"Was that why my room was a mess?"

"Abigail also took the liberty of leaving a ransom note. So when you return, you will be able to marry your count and live happily ever after." Hannibal said, sounding almost proud.

Will had to give his sister credit for being clever. But if their father discovered the ruse, he would be angry- especially with Will's wedding only a week away. The image of a dragon, breathing fire and with scales glittering like amethysts and diamonds, popped into his head, its teeth tearing into Abigail's flesh. Will's breath trembled at the thought.

Maybe it is worth the risk. The wind seemed to whisper the words, reminding him that the date on the invitation had been the thirteenth.

Will tried not to be enticed, but something inside him greedily lapped up this new world and the promises that awaited. Of games and challenges, of finding out who he truly was. Without a strange alpha to hold him back.

The clouds took of orange and red hues as they drew close, as if they were about to catch fire instead of letting loose a rain. It made Will think of Legend's letter, of how the ink had shown in the light. He knew he should find Abigail and return home immediately, but the promises of what could wait tempted him, reminding him of old dreams and thoughts.

But beauty could be deceiving, as shown by the alpha across from him, and dreams and thoughts were dangerous. Promises held disappointment.

"Why is Abigail already on the island?" he asked, shaking his head to clear it.

"Because this boat only holds two. We might have been able to make the trip together, but I did not think it was worth the risk, especially while you were still under the effects of the drug." Hannibal said, giving the oars a powerful stroke and splashing Will again in the process.

"You could express gratitude that I came back for you."

"I never asked you to bring me here in the first place." Will pointed out.

"Did you not spend ten years writing to Legend?"

Heat rose in Will's face and his ears grew hot as he clenched his jaw. That had been something private, something he had only shared with Abigail, and it was clear she had spilled many things to the olde man. And the way Hannibal said Legend's name made him feel foolish, as if he had been a child believing in fairy tales. A child who had yet to realize those happy endings were the biggest lies in the world.

"It is nothing to be ashamed of." Hannibal told him.

"I am sure many young women and omegas write him letters. You have likely heard the tales that he never ages. And the stories say he has a way of making people fall in love with him."

"It wasn't like that. There was nothing romantic in those letters. I just wanted to experience the magic and the game." Will argued, not adding, *I just wanted somebody to talk to.*

Hannibal frowned slightly and tipped his head, as if he didn't believe him.

"If that is true, then why do you no longer want it?"

"Look, I know Abigail probably told you a lot, but clearly she didn't tell you enough. But I think what you saw in the barrel room was enough of an explanation. When I was a kid, all I wanted was to experience Caraval. Now all I want is my sister to be safe."

"Do you not think your sister wants the same thing? I may not know her well, but I do know she does not have a death wish. I also know that she loves you more than anything else in the world and prizes your safety and happiness as much as you do hers. She does not want you to marry this count. I believe this is her way of making sure your future is what you want, not what your father forces upon." Hannibal said, pausing in rowing and allowing the boat to drift over the waves.

Will scowled.

"You have forgotten how to live, Will. She is trying to remind you. Trying to make you see that you are not the delicate, timid omega your father has told you are simply by virtue of

being an omega. But if all you want is safety, I will take you back, if you insist. You are welcome to wait on the ship." Hannibal continued, holding his gaze steadily.

He then nodded to a speck on the horizon that looked no bigger than a fishing boat. Was that the vessel they had taken? Will had pictured something a little bigger when Hannibal had mentioned his ship.

"Even if you know nothing of sailing, it would not take long for a passing ship to pick you up. Omegas in distress are popular candidates for rescue. Or, if you are truly as brave and clever as your sister keeps telling me, you can allow me to keep rowing. You will spend this week on the isle with her and see if she is right about there being more to life than safety." Hannibal said, resuming his rowing.

A wave rocked the boat as they drifted into the isle's circle of chilly clouds, making Will's curls become more untamed and Hannibal's bangs wilt across his forehead.

"You don't understand." Will said with a snort.

"If our father finds out, if we wait to go back to Wolf Trap, he will destroy us. My wedding is a week. This marriage to the count might not be what I imagined, but it is my one shot at a somewhat happy feature. A future where my sister is safe, and I am away from Hobbs. I'd love to experience Caraval, but it isn't worth the risk."

"That is a rather dramatic way to look at things. Correct me if I'm wrong, but not all marriages are pure bliss." Hannibal said, smiling ever so slightly as Will bared his teeth again.

"That's not what I said." Will snapped, hating how he twisted his words.

Water struck him again and he glowered at Hannibal, who played innocent for a moment.

"I will stop when you tell me where you wish to go. I am not wasting my energy simply to take you back to the boat when we arrive. I fully intend to experience Caraval myself." Hannibal said, smirking at him.

They drifted closer to the island, the clouds changing from brassy to greens and blues, as if reflecting the trees and the sea.

The scent on the wind was nothing like Will had ever experienced before. Wolf Trap smelled of decaying leaves in the woods, fish on the shore, animals in the fields, sweet in the gardens and orchards. The air here was sweet and almost citrusy. He wondered if it was drugged, somehow, or enchanted, because as much as he needed to get Abigail and return to Wolf Trap, he was having trouble finding the words to say this to Hannibal. Suddenly he was eleven years old again, naive and hopeful that a letter could make his dreams come true.

When he had first written, it had been shortly after the death of his dad. Abigail's mother had pulled away from them for a time after that, Hobbs had started to harden. He had wanted to give Abigail a happy birthday. They both had been hit hard by the death of his dad, but making Abigail happy had given Will something to focus on. He had tried to fill in the gap

his dad had left in their lives, and again when Abigail's mother had died. But Will had been young, and he had been a poor substitute. Abigail wasn't the only one who had felt the pain of their losses.

It would have been easier if it hadn't been so abrupt. But his dad had fallen ill suddenly, with no warning, no reason, nothing. One day, he had been smiling with Will, talking, taking him fishing, talking of sailing. Then the next he had been gotten sick and gotten worse in the following days. He had never gotten any better. No one knew what it had been.

Will often wondered if Hobbs had anything to do with it. He had tended Johnathan at his bedside. Will had spied through a crack in the door, watched as the alpha had wiped a cool cloth across his dad's forehead, tracing his thumb over the matching amethyst ring on Johnathan's finger. Will had heard the words that had been whispered.

"It's going to be okay. It will all okay." Hobbs had promised, hands gentle, tender, loving.

Will didn't think Hobbs would have actually harmed his dad. He had loved him, and differently than how he loved Will and Abigail. Until Louise had died, Hobbs had never been violent toward his family. He had exerted some authority, yes, but most alphas did. Instincts to keep the pack in line and safe. Eight years later, Louise had died while hiking in the hills of Wolf Trap, some thief stowaway from one of the many ships having cut her neck while she was alone.

Their losses still hit Will hard. His dad had been warmth and happiness, giving him a feeling of safety, hugs when Will would allow, and Louise had been glittering smiles and gentle lessons, pats on top of his head, her own despite no blood between them.

Hobbs had, unusual in this day and age, taken two spouses, two omegas, at roughly the same time, but they had made their own family, their own pack. Johnathan and Louise had loved each other as much as they had Hobbs, if in a platonic way. They had been joy and sunshine, safety and love, and all that had been sucked away from Wolf Trap in two great blows when they had died. Their family had fallen all the way to ruin when Louise had died.

Bella and Jack had started visiting more often after Johnathan's death. Will had always suspected some distance had occurred because Johnathan had gone against their wishes and married Hobbs, and they did not approve of the alpha/omega/omega dynamic of the marriage (Louise had married Hobbs a year before Johnathan). Jack had taken Will out into the woods and fields, teaching him to use his observant skills and pushing him with the odd empathy he had, and Bella had told them wonderous stories. She had been the one to make Will fall in love with Caraval, desire to play the game, to use the skills both his dad and Jack had honed in him. The stories had made Will believe that maybe some of the joy and magic that had begun to fade from Wolf Trap with his dad would return with Legend and his players.

But Bella had died before Louise, and Jack a few years after Bella, she from something happening with her lungs and he from his heart giving out. The dregs of happiness they had brought had gone with them.

For a moment, Will entertained the idea of not only happiness, but of magic. He wondered what it might be like to experience Caraval for just one day, to dip into the magic and

darkness and games, to explore the isle before closing the door on his fantasies forever.

There was a week left until Will's wedding. This was not the time to embark on a foolish adventure. Abigail had plundered Will's room and Hannibal had said she'd left a note, but Hobbs would eventually figure out it was all staged. Staying here was the worst idea possible.

But if Will and Abigail stayed only the first day of Caraval, they could make it back in time for Will's wedding. Will doubted Hobbs would figure out the truth of wher they'd been that soon. They would be safe, so long as he and Abigail only stayed the first twenty-four hours, and Hobbs never figured out what had really happened.

"Time is almost up, Mr. Graham."

The cloud encasing them thinned, and the edge of the isle came into view. Will saw sand so white and fluffy that it hurt his brain to look at, and from the distance it looked like icing on a cake. He could picture Abigail running her fingers through it and coaxing Will to join her, giggling as she had at the black sand so long ago.

"If I go with you, can you promise there will be no more kidnapping attempts if I try to leave with Abigail and go back to Wolf Trap tomorrow?" Will demanded.

Hannibal placed his hand on his heart. "On my honor."

Will wasn't sure he believed Hannibal had much honor. But once they made it inside Caraval, he'd probably abandon them anyway. Or realize that Abigail truly didn't want him.

"You can start rowing again. But if you splash me again, you're going in the water."

Hannibal smiled brilliantly at him and began to to row again, Will feeling something leak into his boot.

"I told you to stop."

"That was not me."

Hannibal pulled the oars back in a powerful stroke, more carefully, but Will's boot filled with more cold. It was even colder than Wolf Trap's crisp coast... In the Cold Season.

Will looked down at the floor of the boat, seeing that lovely blue water was now in it with them.

"Damn it. There's a hole in the boat." he said.

Hannibal bared his teeth as the water gushed up to their ankles.

"Can you swim?"

"I grew up on an island. Of course I can swim."

Hannibal pulled off his coat and tossed it over the side of the boat.

"If you take off your clothes it will be easier. You are wearing an undergarment, I presume?"

Will looked at the island, more than a hundred yards away. He could swim that far. His dad had made sure, in the lake and off the coast. The swim would be impossible fully clothed; they had to use this time to make sure they had the greatest chance in the cold water.

But what would they wear on the island? That crossed his mind for a second, but he cast it aside. The island hosted guests, there would be something. Abigail would have money.

Will ripped off his own clothes and Hannibal tossed off his shirt, both of them quickly in nothing but their undergarments. Will dove in, Hannibal following.

The iciness of the water was shocking, but Will knew how to handle cold water and he tried not to feel embarrassed about the fact Hannibal had seen and would see him almost completely naked. The alpha had probably seen plenty of omegas that way. And this was survival, it didn't matter.

He was admittedly surprised by how strong of a swimmer Hannibal was; his clothes had been hiding the fact he was muscular, and the alpha traveled through the water smoothly. Will wasn't as elegant, but he was capable, and kept up. They reached Aukstaitija at about the same time. Up close, the sand looked fluffier. Fluffier, and more like... Snow. More than he had ever seen in Wolf Trap. Resting clouds of blinding white, forming a cold carpet that covered the entire shore.

All strangely and eerily untouched.

"Do not give up on me now." Hannibal said as they stood in the shallows.

He grabbed Will's hand and tugged him toward the banks of white.

"We need to keep moving."

"Wait-" Will protested, digging his heels in.

He scanned the crisp snow a second time. Again, it reminded him of a frosted cake. Perfect, smooth, blinding... And without so much as an Abigail-sized footprint marring its surface.

"Where's my sister?"

Chapter End Notes

As always, polite questions and comments are welcome! I hope you guys are still enjoying this.

I know we never see Will's swimming abilities, but I'm taking a whack at it and saying he would be as good as Hannibal is. I mean, he sailed all the way to Palermo by himself and wades in the river all the time, plus worked on boats, so it seems like he would know how to swim.

And do you guys think of the parents' deaths? Anyone notice anything?

Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Will and Hannibal make it onto the island.

Chapter Notes

Again, fresh off the press and edited in a time crunch.

Thanks to everyone who has commented and given kudos and is still reading! I appreciate it.

Again, questions and comments are always welcome, no matter how long ago this was posted.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The clouds swooped over the sun, sucking the rich colors from the snow, leaving only periwinkle shadows at Will's feet, matching the feeling in his heart.

"Where's Abigail?" he repeated.

"I likely dropped her off on a different part of the beach." Hannibal said, pushing his hair from his eyes.

"We need to keep moving or we will freeze to death. Once we warm up and find the appropriate attire, we can search for your sister." he continued, reaching for Will's hand.

"Abigail!" Will called out, moving away, his teeth already chattering.

Between the cold water soaking his skin, his wet underwear, and the snow pushing between his toes, he felt colder than he had the night Hobbs had made him sleep outside when he had caught Abigail in her first (known to him) kiss. Still, he was not going to leave without finding his sister.

"ABIGAIL!"

"You are wasting your breath." Hannibal said, looking at him.

Dripping wet and in his underwear, the alpha somehow managed to look more dangerous than usual as he glared at Will.

"Once we are warm and dry, we can search for your sister. When I dropped her off, she had a cloak and gloves. Wherever she is, she will not freeze, but if we do not find somewhere warm soon, we will. We should head for whatever is between those trees."

Past where the beach's mantle of snow ended, there was a line of thick trees, ad beyond that rose a plume of sunset-orange smoke. Will swore it hadn't been there a minute ago. The trees had been much further back when they had been in the boat, hadn't they?

"N-No-" Will stuttered. "We-"

"We can not continue to walk around like this." Hannibal cut him off firmly. "Your lips are turning purple. We need to locate the smoke."

"I don't care! My sister-"

"She likely went to find the entrance to Caraval. We only have until the end of the day to find it. We should find the source of the smoke, and then do the same. I told her if we were separated to meet us inside." Hannibal said, marching forward.

His feet crunched the bare snow and Will thought his lips were tinged purple, too.

But his eyes darted to the pristine beach one more time. Abigail had never been good at waiting patiently- Or even impatiently. But if she had already gone into Caraval, why was there no sign of her?

Reluctantly, Will followed after Hannibal. Bits of leaves and the occasional pine needle stuck to feet he could no longer feel as a dirt path replaced the snow. But while his feet pressed into the soft earth and left marks, there was no sign of Abigail's boot prints.

"She most likely took a different route from the beach. I believe I did drop her off further to the west. I did not pay attention to how far we drifted after you woke." Hannibal said from ahead of him.

He did not shiver like Will did, as if he were used to the cold, but his lips were definitely taking on a blue hue, matching the trees' long shadows.

Will wanted to argue, but he felt as if he had risen from the depths of winter, his minimal clothing like sheets of ice against him. He had thought he was tolerant of the cold, but he guessed not, and the forest was colder than the shoreline. He wrapped his arms around himself, but that only made him colder.

"We need to get you somewhere warm." Hannibal said, concern flashing across his face.

"But Abigail-"

"-Is smart enough to already be waiting for us. If you freeze, you will not find her, and I imagine I will not possess my life for much longer." Hannibal's arms wrapped around Will's shoulders as he spoke.

Will stiffened.

"I am just trying to keep you warm, Will. Nothing more." Hannibal said, looking mildly offended.

"You're freezing too-" *And practically naked.*

Will did not tell Hannibal that he did not like to be touched. That he his skin would crawl and prickle, even consensual touches sometimes having that effect. Did not tell him that Hobbs and Jack were the only alphas to have ever physically touched him. That, unlike his sister, he had never seen a naked man outside his relatives. That his father would likely whip Abigail if he found out that Will was strolling around with a mostly-naked alpha right before his wedding. Hobbs had always kept Will well away from alphas. So for a strange alpha to touch him, especially in such an... *Intimate* position was frightening in a way he did not like.

He pulled away in a hurry, half stumbling, as the forest came to an end and the dirt path transformed into a smooth path of opalescent stones, smooth and pretty as sea glass. The road wound away further than he could see, branching off and twisting like some maze. It was lined with mismatched buildings in jewel tones and pastels, almost stacked on top of each other like a spill of boxes.

It was charming in a fairy tale way, but eerily silent and still. Will's neck prickled at that. The shops were all closed, and snow rested on them in thick drifts. Will had no idea what sort of place this was, but it was not how he had pictured Caraval from Nana's stories.

Sunset smoke still plumed in the air, but it seemed as far away as when they had been on the beach.

"Will, we need to keep moving." Hannibal said, urging him down the curious street.

Will staggered, losing his balance on the slick stones, and Hannibal caught him. Will was shaking like a leaf and his skin felt like ice, Hannibal frowning at him.

"Will, I am going to touch you now. It is for your own good." he told him.

Before Will could register this, Hannibal had scooped him up and Will yelled, looping his arms around the alpha's neck. Hannibal was carrying him bridal style and his own icy skin pressed against Will's, but it was somehow warmer.

Will squirmed a little, the scent glands along the alpha's jaw incredibly close to his face, filling his nose with the scent of Hannibal.

Before he could try to get free or protest, Will was distracted by the odd little village. All closed up, still and silent, and Will began to wonder if the cold could make you hallucinate or if something was just wrong with his head, because the signs made no sense. They had many different languages stacked on top of each other, and what he could read... Well... They said things like, *Open Sometime After Midnight,* or, *Come Back Yesterday.*

"Why is everything closed?" he asked, breath coming out in fragile puffs of white.

"And where is everyone?"

This was very unnerving.

"Do not let go of me. We need to get somewhere warm." Hannibal said, pressing onward, past equally strange shops.

There were hats covered in taxidermy birds. Women's headbands decorated with human teeth. Mirrors that could reflect the darkness of someone's soul. Yes. The cold was definitely messing with his head. Will hoped that Hannibal was right and Abigail was somewhere warm. He continued to look for glimpses of his sister, a flash or auburn hair or her voice echoing off the streets, but everything remained still, empty, and silent.

Hannibal tried knocking and then tried the knobs. Nothing.

The next row of closed shops boasted fantastical rather than morbid things. Fallen stars. Seeds that could grow wishes. Georgia's Ocular sold eyeglasses that showed the future (*Available in four colors*).

"Those would be nice." Will muttered, thinking of his mysterious fiancé.

Next door to Georgia's, a banner claimed the proprietor could repair broken imaginations. That message floated above bottles of supposed dreams and nightmares, and something called *daymares,* which Will imagined he was experiencing at the moment as his curls froze like frost whorls on a window.

He heard an odd scrabbling sound, and it grew closer, but he could not place it, and Hannibal did appear to hear it, so Will guessed his hearing was being messed with, too.

Hannibal muttered something in a different language. Beyond the last row of tipped-over box buildings, they could almost see where the smoke came from, and now it was twisting into two feathered stags with interlocked antlers, a teardrop caged in the middle- the symbol of Caraval. But the cold had reached Will's bones and teeth; even his eyes felt frosty.

"Wait- what- about- there!"

Releasing Hannibal with one hand, Will jabbed a shaking finger at Ingram's Clocks. At first he thought the window was lined with brass, but then he realized it displayed a forest of pendulums and hands, all in different metals. Beyond the pane and through the metal forest burned a fire in a large fireplace. And the sign on the door said, *Always Open.*

A chorus of tick-tocks, chimes, cuckoos, and wind-up gears greeted them as Hannibal used his shoulder to open the door, dashing inside. Limbs Will had thought were gone suddenly prickled with feeling and pain, heat scorching his lungs as he breathed in.

"Hello?" he called out over the noise, his voice coming out hoarse and raspy as his vocal cords unfrozen.

Tick-tock.

Tick-tock.

Only gears and cogs answered back.

The shop was round, like a clock face. The floor was tiled in a mosaic of different numbers, forming a crooked face, and timepieces covered almost every surface. Some ran backward; others were full of exposed innerworkings that Will appreciated the mechanics of. On the back wall several moved like puzzles with their pieces coming together as the hour drew near. A heavy glass case in the center of the room with a heavy lock claimed the watch inside could turn back time. Any other day Will would have been intrigued, but he zeroed in on the fireplace, Hannibal moving over there quickly.

Hannibal set Will on a small chair beside it and pulled the grate back, stoking the fire until the flames leapt high.

Hannibal stood and Will sat for a few minutes, slowly thawing, both of them gasping in relief at the sensation despite the pain that came with it.

"We should get out of our clothes." Hannibal abruptly said.

"I-" Will began to protest when Hannibal crossed over to a rosewood grandfather clock.

Two sets of boots rested at its feet, and two clothing hangers were swinging from the pediments on either side.

"It appears *someone* is looking out for you." Hannibal said, that teasing quality in his voice again.

Will was too cold to get mad. He stood on wobbly legs and inched closer. Next to the clothes, on a table covered in moon dials, a curvy vase filled with purple, pink, and yellow flowers sat next to a chair laden with cinnamon bread, strong black tea, and a note.

For Mr. Will Graham and his companion.

I'm so glad you could make it.

Legend

The message was written in the same gold-edged paper as the letter Will had received on Wolf Trap. He wondered if Legend went through such pains with all his guests. It was difficult for Will to believe he was special, yet he couldn't imagine the Master of Caraval bestowed personal greetings and much-needed gifts on every visitor to his island.

"You should eat and drink. You were unconscious for a rather long time. It might be why the cold affected you so." Hannibal said, sliding past him.

He pulled the knife he had kept with him from the belt he had kept and Will watched as the blade, curved like a claw, sliced neatly through the bread. Hannibal placed the first slice on a plate and offered it to Will, pouring a steaming stream of tea into a cup next.

"Sit and eat." he said, pulling the coverings off one set of clothes and draping it around Will's shoulders like a blanket.

Will obeyed, the scents suddenly making him realize he was hungry, and Hannibal found another chair, sitting across from him.

"Uh, thank you." Will said after swallowing down a hunk of bread.

"No need to thank me." Hannibal said and they sat in silence for the majority of their meal.

"Look, going into Caraval, I guess we could pretend to get along. I owe you. If you need help with the game while Abigail and I are still here, I can give it to you. Clear up the debt." Will said into the silence.

"Or we could simply socialize like adults. We could even partner for the game. I can assure you, Abigail intends to stay the entire week. You will have a hard time convincing her otherwise." Hannibal said, sipping his tea.

"I don't find you that interesting. I just want to pay you back for not letting me freeze to death in the street." Will said dismissively.

"You will." Hannibal promised, mischief suddenly in his gaze.

Will looked at him and then chuckled slightly, shaking his head. What sort of alpha had Abigail found? The way Hannibal had said it was ominous, though. Like a serious promise.

They polished off their meal and then Hannibal stood, selecting the hanger that was clearly meant for him- Or, rather, Will's fiancé.

He glanced at Will, who was watching him.

"You are staring, Mr. Graham. I do not mind if you watch, but you do not need to try to hide it." he said and Will growled.

He stood and snatched his own hanger, but there was no place that offered privacy and despite being half-naked, he wanted it.

"If you turn your back, we can both change." he said, looking anywhere but Hannibal.

"We can also dress facing each other. It is not a matter of what we are capable of doing, merely what you wish us to do." Hannibal corrected, a smile in his voice.

"That is not what I meant and you know it." Will snapped.

Hannibal chuckled. But when Will looked back, he had turned around, and if he was peeking, he wasn't being obvious about it. Will tried not to stare again. Hannibal was certainly fit, but turning his back had displayed scars, what looked like knife slashes. Will spotted two more on his inner wrists as his arms moved, long slashes that could have easily killed him. A brand sat off-center on his back, vicious and cruel.

Will sucked in sharply and immediately felt guilty. He shouldn't have been looking. He had asked Hannibal not to look at him, he should show him the same courtesy. He hastily grabbed

his clothes and focused on getting dressed. He shouldn't have been looking. He wouldn't want anyone to see his scars.

Mostly Hobbs just left bruises, but since he had first started his violence, Will had been careful not to let anyone see him, not even a maid, not even Abigail (though when they went swimming together, she had seen, and she had her own scars). Even when he'd had to wear ridiculously fancy things for dinners with a suitor or two. He had never seen the appeal of having someone help you dress or wearing something that required more than someone lacing or buttoning up the back for you.

He winced as he dressed. He immediately hated the fabric of every single piece of clothing (including the dry underwear that had been included). It didn't fit quite right either, and was extraordinarily bland. Just the same dark bluish-green color with a white shirt. He felt like he had borrowed someone else's clothes and if it hadn't been the only option, he would have taken off the horrible fabric immediately.

"May I turn around now? It is nothing I have not already seen." Hannibal asked politely.

The way he had carried Will down the street instantly came to mind and he bit his lip, though a tingle went through him.

"Thanks for the reminder." he said dryly.

If Hobbs found about that, Abigail's face would be black and blue for the wedding. Or maybe not her face. But certainly some part of her.

"I was not speaking of you, Will, I merely-

"I'm putting on my boots." Will said, sitting on the chair to do so.

When he looked up, he saw that Legend had not given Hannibal clothes that were unattractive, made of skin-prickling fabric, or not quite fitted to the wearer. Though they had been meant for someone else, they suited him rather well.

Will's eyes traveled over the burgundy cravat swirled with cobalt and gold tied around the alpha's throat, complimenting his matching blue shirt, which was covered by a burgundy waistcoat and a gray coat that fell toward his knees, his pants a darker shade of gray. The pants were tucked into nearly knee-high boots of a dark color that could have been black, gray, or brown. The only thing that remained of his sailor attire was the belt slung around his hips, holding the curved knife.

"You look- Different. No longer looks like you swipe innocent omegas off beaches in the middle of the night." Will said, hastily pulling his gaze away.

Hannibal smiled and adjusted his cravat, as if Will had complimented him, and Will wasn't sure he hadn't. It didn't seem fair that someone so infuriating could look so good. Although despite his crisp and fancy clothes, there was still something in Hannibal that didn't seem like a perfect gentleman- Will could sense a predator beneath the surface, see it in the depths of his eyes. There was something in him that could not be tamed. The sharp planes of his face,

the quite intelligence, the calculating expression in his maroon eyes- They were in no way minimized by because he now wore a cravat or... Or... A pocket watch?

"Did you steal that?" Will asked.

"I am borrowing it. I fully intend to return and pay the owner back when I am able to retrieve some funds. I will leave a note." Hannibal corrected, looking downright offended by the implication that he might steal.

"I can see why Legend sent you tickets." he added softly, eyes skimming Will thoroughly.

"What is that supposed to-" Will began, breaking off as he caught sight of himself in a mirrored clock.

No longer ill-fitting or that odd color, his clothes now looked as though they had been meant for him. His shirt was a dark salmon and his pants were dark, the belt black leather to match. His jacket had transformed into a dark gray coat with a herringbone pattern, a black scarf hanging around his neck. Even his boots had transformed, now glossy and dark leather rather than light and plain.

He ran his hands over the materials just to make sure it wasn't a trick of the light, though he could already feel that it wasn't. Or maybe his mind had been playing tricks on him this whole time. But deep down Will knew there was only one explanation. Legend had given him magic clothes.

Magic like this was only supposed to exist in stories, but this was very real, leaving Will unsure of what to think. The child inside of him loved it, remembering his nana's stories; the adult in him new gifts like this never came without a price. He also didn't feel comfortable, though the material and fit were better. Hobbs would never allow him to wear something so eye-catching and even though he wasn't here, attention was still something he didn't crave.

Will was a handsome man, though he had never given much thought or care to it. He'd inherited his dad's dark curls, which had dried neat, somehow, and oddly looked as though he had brushed them. He had a strong jaw, a scattering of stubble, and piercing blue eyes, more his dad's son than his father's.

For a moment he almost wished for the weird clothes back. No one noticed omegas in ugly clothes. Maybe if he thought about, the clothes would change back. But even as he envisioned something similar to what he usually wore, the clothes remained, drawing attention to him like his clothes never had.

Hannibal's cryptic words came back- *I can see why Legend sent you tickets*- and Will wondered if he had found a way to escape his father's games on Wolf Trap only to become a well-dressed piece a new game board.

"If you are finished admiring yourself- which I can not fault you for- should we search for the sister you are so eager to find?" Hannibal asked, watching Will in the mirror.

"I would think you would be worried about her, too." Will said, turning away from the mirror.

"Then you think too highly of me." Hannibal said, heading for the door as every chime in the shop rang out.

"You might not want to exit that way." an unfamiliar voice said, making them both freeze.

Chapter End Notes

Just so you know what I was going for, Will's outfit was inspired by the infamous salmon-colored shirt he wore when he had his session as Hannibal's patient and his season 2 jacket and scarf. Hannibal's was inspired by his outfit in the promo group shot of season 1, which I know he wore in an episode and I can't remember which one. I wanted something that was opposite of Will's palette a little.

Hope you enjoyed!

Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

They reach the gates.

Chapter Notes

This was posted WAAAYYY too late and not beta read again, so any and all mistakes are on me. And I also am probably going to stop put chapter summaries; I suck at them and my brain feels broken when I am trying to write them. If you want them to stay, let me know. They will probably just start consisting of which night of Caraval the chapters are taking place on.

Again, thanks to everyone who has commented and left kudos!

As always, all polite questions and comments are welcome!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The man standing behind them was young with light brown hair and bright eyes, a scattering of stubble on his face. There was a scar on his chin. His coat was shiny brown leather, his suspenders looked like they were crafted of brass. It looked like he was trying to imitate a clock.

"We weren't stealing. We were-" Will began to deny, glancing at the note on the table.

"You should speak for yourself, handsome." the man said, smiling.

Will knew from his father that it was best not to appear guilty. But he couldn't help but slide his eyes toward Hannibal for a split second, thinking of the watch he had liberated.

"I knew it!" the man exclaimed, his cedar beta scent becoming apparent.

Hannibal moved toward Will as if to shove him out the door.

"Oh, no! Don't go. I was just kidding. I'm not Ingram. My name is Matthew. I don't care if you steal a watch or try to make off with a whole grandfather clock." the beta said with a laugh.

"Then why were you trying to stop us from leaving?" Hannibal challenged, his hand moving ever so slightly toward the knife on his belt.

"Don't get your hair in a knot, alpha." Matthew said, looking at Hannibal distastefully.

"He's a bit paranoid, isn't he?" he said, turning to Will.

Will said nothing, because he was feeling suspicious as well. Where had Matthew come from? And was it just him, or... Were the clocks on the wall ticking faster?

"Come on. Abigail's probably worried." Will said to Hannibal, turning from the beta.

He didn't like the man's gaze on him. It was like all his layers were being peeled back and looked at, the look in the beta's eyes making him uncomfortable. He was looking at Will like he was a pretty trinket.

"Hey, I have a way for you to find whoever you're looking for faster." Matthew said conversationally, though his gaze didn't break away from Will.

He sauntered over to the rosewood clock and swung the front open, tugging on one of the golden weights. As he did, one of puzzle clocks on the back wall shifted, its mellitic pieces catching the light. Click. Clack. The pieces rearranged themselves into a clock, the hands at weird positions, the numbers all crowded near each other, like they had fallen.

A second hand appeared, forming an odd handle.

Matthew beamed.

"Today only! For quite the bargain you two can use this entrance- a shortcut right to the heart of Caraval!" he said theatrically.

"How do we know that is not merely an entrance to your basement?" Hannibal asked, eyes narrowed.

"You have to look with all your senses. Does it look like a basement door? Does it feel like one?" Matthew said, touching the handle.

Immediately, all the clocks in the shop went silent.

"If you go out the normal way, you'll have to face the cold and still find the gates. This will save you time." Matthew said and released the handle.

All the clocks began to tick again, still at that almost too-fast pace. Will wasn't sure if he believed Matthew. Yet, there was something obviously magical about the portal in the wall. It felt a bit like the clothes he wore, like it took up a different space than something like it should have. And if it was a shortcut to Caraval, then he would find his sister faster.

"What will it cost us?" Will asked, seeing no harm in asking the question.

"Are you actually considering his offer?" Hannibal asked, brows slanting.

"If it will get us to my sister faster." Will said, but something wasn't sitting quite right with him.

He still felt that suspicion, but he had been thinking that maybe it was because he just was not inclined to trust anyone. He was also surprised by Hannibal's reluctance; he had thought the alpha would pounce on any shortcut they could take. But now, his eyes darted around almost nervously.

"Do you think it's a bad idea?"

"I believe that smoke we spied earlier is at the entrance of Caraval, and I would prefer to keep my currency." Hannibal answered almost carefully.

"But you don't even know the price yet!" Matthew protested.

Hannibal looked at Will for one tick of the second hand. His expression was unreadable, but something flickered through his maroon eyes and when he spoke, Will could detect the slightest strain in his voice.

"Do whatever you please, Will, but I should warn you: Be careful of who you trust here. Many take more than you realize, and most of them are not who they appear to be." he said, the shop bell tinkling as he stepped out.

Muttering a curse, Will turned to follow. He had not expected Hannibal to stay with him forever- just until they found Abigail- but he was suddenly unnerved by his absence. He moved after him.

"Oh, come on, wait." Matthew said, moving after him.

"Are you really going to allow that alpha to make a choice for you? He isn't your mate; I can smell that on you. He has no control over what you do. Are you really going to let someone else make up your mind for you?" he continued.

His words made Will pause. He was ready to trust his instincts, but the word choice made him stop. It was a word filled with temptation; it sounded like freedom. Even before his dad and Louise had died, he had had very few choices in his life. His father had snatched so many that were nothing more than mundane away from him, even taking a lot the simple ones, too. Or maybe he stopped because he didn't want to let go of his childhood fantasies of magic and wanted to believe Matthew.

He thought of how easily the door had formed, how all the clocks had stopped ticking when Matthew had touched the knob.

"Even if I was interested, I don't have any money." Will said, giving himself a mental shake.

"But what if I'm not asking for money?" Matthew asked with a grin.

Will's stomach dipped, thinking of the only thing of value he currently had. And that thing was himself or rather, his body. Hobbs had always warned him of what alphas and even betas would want from him.

"Don't look so afraid. It's a real bargain. All I want is to borrow your voice." Matthew said, laughing softly.

Will choked back nervous laughter.

"My voice?" he asked in disbelief.

"That doesn't seem like a fair trade." *Was a voice even something someone could borrow?*

"I only want it for an hour. It will take you at least that long to follow that smoke and find the entrance to Caraval. Then you still have to get inside the house and start the game *and* find this sister of yours. I can get you inside right now." Matthew said, pulling a watch from his pocket and winding both the minute and hour hands to the top.

"Say yes, and this device will take your voice away for sixty minutes, and my door takes you straight into the heart of Caraval."

He could find his sister right now.

But something just wasn't right. What if he was lying? What if he took it for more than an hour? What if he did something with it that Will couldn't even imagine? What if he gave it back, but it wasn't the same? Will was reluctant to trust someone he had just met, even more so after Hannibal's warning. And the thought of being without a voice terrified him. His cries had never stopped his father from hurting Abigail, but he had always at least been able to call out, let Abigail know he was still there. If he gave his voice away, he would be powerless. If he saw Abigail from a distance, he wouldn't be able to call out. And what if Abigail wasn't actually inside, but waiting outside the gates?

Will only knew how to survive through caution (and what his dad had taught him, but he had never been able to use that). When his father made deals, there was almost always something awful he failed to mention. He couldn't risk that happening now.

And he really did not like the way Matthew was looking at him. Plus... He recalled the instructions on the tickets. Nana had mentioned something about rules in her stories, about how breaking them was very important.

"I'll, uh, take my chances with the regular entrance." Will said firmly.

Matthew's smile turned into a disappointed frown.

"Aw. Well, your loss. It really would've been a bargain, you know." he said, opening the puzzle door.

For a brilliant, blinding moment, Will was able to glimpse the other side: a burning sky in melting lemons and flaming oranges, mingling with molten golds and smoldering reds, spring-bright hints of purples here and there. Thin rivers that shown like liquid silver. A laughing girl with auburn hair-

"Abigail!" Will exclaimed, bolting for the door.

Matthew slammed it before he got there.

"Wh- No!"

Will seized the second hand, but it crumbled to ash in his palm. The puzzle pieces forming the door fell apart, clicking until it was entirely gone.

He should have made the trade. Abigail would have done it. No, in fact, Will was certain his sister already had and that was why she had been nowhere to be found; that must have been how she had gotten in in the first place. Abigail never worried about the future or consequences; it was Will's job to do that for her. So he should have felt better knowing that Abigail was already safe inside Caraval, Will could only worry about the kinds of trouble his sister would get in without him. He should be there with her. And now, thanks to his hesitation, he had missed the chance and had lost Hannibal as well.

And underneath is all... Will also felt a surge of anger at the sight of his sister inside already, laughing without a care in the world, not sparing a moment of thought to where he and Hannibal might have gotten to.

Turning, Will fled from Ingram's shop. Whatever warmth he had been feeling inside went as soon as he stepped out, though his coat protected him from the cold. He had not thought they had been in the shop long, but already the morning had disappeared, along with the early afternoon. The houses and shops were thrown in long shadows approaching evening.

Time must move faster on the island.

Will was worried that he would blink and find the stars wheeling above him. Not only had he become separated from Abigail and Hannibal, but he had also wasted valuable time. The day was almost over, and the invitation said he only had until midnight to make it to the gates.

The wind tugged at Will's scarf and coat, but he didn't have time to properly button up.

"Hannibal!" he called out.

There was no sign of his former companion. He didn't think the game had already started, but he felt as though he were already losing.

For a panicked moment, he thought the smoke had disappeared as well, but then he spotted it, harder to pick out against the darkening sky. Past the storybook shops, it rose out of a massive brick chimney, belonging to one of the largest houses Will had ever seen. He jogged forward, taking in the sight. It was four stories high and had elegant turrets, balconies, and flower boxes filled with all sorts of flowers he was able to identify as he grew closer. Rich purple belladonna, white oleanders, vivid yellow ragwort, mingled with red and pink flowers he didn't recognize. Cherry trees grew around it, their blossoms tinged lightly pink, it seemed. All somehow untouched by the snow, which had started to fall again.

Will heard that odd tapping, scrabbling noise again as he jogged and he was unnerved, though there was a familiarity to it that he could not place in this moment. Another chill slid over him as footsteps approached and he heard a low, dark chuckle.

"You did not take that beta up on his offer?"

Will jumped and spun, baring his teeth, and in the process tripped over something warm and solid, which wiggled and yelped.

A dog. It was a dog.

"No need to be scared, Mr. Graham." Hannibal said, emerging from the shadows of a nearby building just as the sun slipped away.

"Why haven't you gone in yet?" Will demanded, getting to his knees.

He was relieved, however, not to have been left alone, if still a little nervous. Matthew had rattled him a bit. A few minutes ago, Hannibal had rushed from the clock shop. Now he moved like he had all the time in the world.

Will's attention was admittedly drawn to the dog, which had skittered nervously away, peering at him with curious caution. A fluffy golden creature, it had some black brindling and floppy ears, its plumed tail swishing a little. Will was instantly smitten. He loved dogs, but after his dad's last dog had died, Hobbs had forbidden Will from adopting any. He had fed the strays on Wolf Trap all the same, however. This dog was certainly a stray. A gnawed-on, dirty old rope hung around his neck, and he was dirty too, a little skinny under all that fluff. Hannibal spoke again and distracted him.

"Perhaps I was hoping you would come." he said, smiling a little.

Will found it a little hard to believe that Hannibal had been waiting her for him, especially after the abrupt way he had left the shop. Maybe he was just paranoid for losing his chance of getting to Abigail instantly, and still on edge because of Matthew. He told himself that Matthew was gone and that he would be with Abigail soon enough. But what if he couldn't find her once they were inside?

The mansion was even larger up close, sprawling toward the sky as if the wood that made it up was still alive and growing. The scents of the flowers became evident, mixing together in a subtle yet heady perfume. A fifty-foot-tall iron fence encircled it, formed of shapes both vulgar and innocent. They seemed to move, even perform. Dancing, naked girls and omegas being chased by naughty boys and alphas. Witches riding tigers and kings upon dragons. Chariots pulled by winged horses. And at the center of it all hung a brilliant banner the color of fresh blood, the silver symbol of Caraval upon its center.

If Abigail were here, she would have clung to Will's arm and giggled, and he might have grinned with her, in the way only siblings could. Abigail would pretend not to be impressed, though she secretly would have been delighted. It was not the same with a strange alpha, who looked neither excited nor impressed.

After how he had helped him all day, Will had to admit that his first impression of Hannibal had been a bad one. He was not the scoundrel alpha he had first thought, but he also doubted Hannibal was also the simple sailor he claimed. He eyed the gate suspiciously, his shoulders set, his back stiffly straight. Any of the laziness Will had seen on the boat had vanished; Hannibal was now a boxed coil, prepared to spring into action at the slightest wrong move.

"I believe we should look further down for a gate." Hannibal said, eyes trailing over the fence.

"What about that flag? Surely it marks the spot." Will asked, pointing at it, as it were possible to miss.

"No, I believe it is further down. Trust me."

Will didn't, but after his blunder in the clock shop, he had no right to even trust himself. He also didn't want to be left alone again. Being alone on Wolf Trap was one thing; being alone here was something else. About another twenty yards down was another flag, it turned out.

"Okay, this looks exactly the same as the spot beneath the-"

"Welcome!"

A lovely woman emerged from behind the banner, standing balanced atop a magnificent horse decked out in fantastical silver armor, clever (but fake) wings and a horn making it look something out of a fantasy novel. It snorted and tossed its mane, the woman perched easily on the saddle. Her dark curls were held with pins shaped like wings, her blue eyes sparkling alongside the silver makeup lining her eyes.

"You are just in time." she said and, as she spoke, the lanterns dripping from the gates lit up, bright blue-gold sparks and flames.

"I love it when that happens." the woman said with a small sigh of delight.

Will found himself staring; she was not unattractive, this woman, and her scent of ginger and grapefruit- alpha- was intoxicating and exotic. Her outfit was black with silver stripes, her lipstick a bold red, and the outfit... Will had only ever seen that much skin on Abigail, when they were swimming, or he was fixing her up.

"Now, before I can let either of you in, I need to see your tickets." the woman said, looking down at them, easily shifting to her knees in the saddle.

Will's heart lurched. He had forgotten about the tickets. Had he left them in his pockets when they had stripped on the boat? Wh-

"Not to worry, *mylimasis*, I have them." Hannibal said, curving his arm around Will, pulling him close unexpectedly.

And what the hell did '*mylimasis*' mean?

"Go along with it, please." Hannibal whispered in his ear as he reached into his pocket and removed two slips of paper, both slightly wilted from the ocean.

Will bit his tongue as his name appeared on the first ticket. The woman held up the other to the lanterns, frowning slightly.

"That is a little unusual. I don't normally see tickets without a name." she commented, turning it this way and that.

"Is that a problem?" Will asked, suddenly uneasy.

The woman looked down at Hannibal and her bright demeanor faded, suspicion instead filling her blue eyes.

Will was about to explain how he had gotten the tickets Hannibal squeezed him just a little harder, in what felt like a warning.

"Caraval Master Legend sent it. The two of us are to be married. He gifted the tickets to my fiancé, Will Graham."

"Oh!" The woman clapped. "I know all about the two of you. Master Legend's special guests. My apologies."

She peered at Will more closely.

"I should have recognized your name. I'm sorry. So many names. Sometimes I forget which one is mine." she said, laughing at her own joke.

Will tried to force a chuckle of his own, but all he could think about was Hannibal's arm wrapped around him and the fact he had called her his *fiancé.*

"You will want to make sure you hold onto these." the woman said, handing the tickets back to Hannibal through the gate.

For a moment their eyes locked together and it seemed like there was something she was going to say. Then she seemed to think better of it. Breaking her gaze away, the woman reached into the bodice of her outfit and pulled out a scroll of black paper from her cleavage. Will tried not to stare.

"Now, before I can let you two in, there is one more thing." she said, her horse prancing, kicking up swirls of snow.

"This will be repeated again once you are inside. Master Legend insists that everyone hears it twice."

She cleared her throat and suddenly sprang up onto her feet, poised on the silvery leather like she was about to take flight.

"Welcome, welcome to Caraval! The grandest show on land or by sea. Inside you'll experience more wonders than most people see in a lifetime. You can sip magic from a cup and buy dreams in a bottle. But before you fully enter our world, you must remember that it is all just a game. What happens beyond this gate may frighten you or excite you, but do not let it trick you. We will try to convince you that it is real, but it is all just a performance. A world built of make-believe. So while we want you to get swept away, be careful of getting swept too far. Dreams that come true can be beautiful, but they can also become nightmares when people won't wake up."

She paused, her horse prancing and turning, snorting and creating gentle puffs of white in the air.

"If you're here to play the game, you will want to take that path."

The path to the woman's left lit up with puddles of silver wax, making the way sparking and shimmer in the dark.

"If you're here to watch..."

She nodded to her right, where hanging paper lanterns suddenly glowed dim, sunset-orange, looking neither magical nor welcoming.

Hannibal dipped his head close to Will.

"Do not tell me you came all this way to merely watch." he said.

"Of course not." Will said as the gate opened; he thought they might have to materialize magically on the other side, as it had not been visible as a gate until this moment.

He hesitated for just a moment, looking at the wonderous candles flickering against the full night, the shadows lurking behind the trees, and flower bushes that lined the sparkling path. Dark and alluring, leading straight to a dream he had clung to for so long.

I'm only staying for a day. he reminded himself.

"Wait!" the woman said, stopping them before they could go forward.

They halted and Will thought for a terrible moment she had realized Hannibal was not who he claimed to be.

"Does that belong to you?" the woman asked, pointing.

Will followed her gaze. Sitting a few yards behind them was the golden stray, still watching, looking a bit hopeful.

"Yes." Will said and Hannibal reached into his pocket.

He unfolded a handkerchief and Will saw that a hunk of the cinnamon bread had been wrapped inside, which he dropped into Will's hand. Will accepted it and tore it up, tossing it out. The dog came closer and closer, little by little, until Will was able to feed him the last few bites by hand. After that, the dog's caution evaporated. He nuzzled Will's fingers and licked the crumbs from them, sniffing his scent glands enthusiastically. Will smiled and picked up the rope, holding it loosely in his hand.

"I'm ready now." he said to Hannibal, who coiled his arm back around him, keeping up their charade.

Chapter End Notes

I appreciate it. I hope I wrote Matthew right; he really didn't talk much in the show and I needed a random person here. He probably won't come back, but you never know. Also, here's Winston! I want to put the other dogs in, so they might appear, but for right now it's just Winston. Seven dogs might be just six too many to handle during Caraval, and I also am very bad at keeping them straight.

Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

The Night of Caraval Eve

Chapter Notes

Sorry for this chapter taking so long to get out! It only took me like an hour and a half collectively to get it down, but I had to write a Dr. Strange story that wouldn't get out of my head first so it would leave me alone and I could focus on this.

Thanks again to everyone who has commented and stuck with the story!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The night was black, the almost-full moon either having not risen yet or swathed in clouds that allowed the stars to shine brightly against the expanse of darkness, as Will took his first steps into Caraval. He and Hannibal crossed the threshold of the wrought iron gate, stepping into a land that should only exist in the most wild of stories.

While the rest of the world had suddenly gone dark, the grand mansion blazed with light. Each window shimmered with golden illumination, turning the flowers in the boxes into magical fallen stars as their light shone through the petals. The citrus scent of before was gone. Now the air was thicker, almost syrupy, and sweeter than on Wolf Trap, but Will only scented bitter.

He was just too aware of Hannibal. Of the warm, secure weight of his arm around his waist, and the way that he had used that arm to sell his lies. He had been to nervous at the gate to argue, too anxious to find his sister, but now Will was wondering if he had just gotten himself into another mess.

"What was that about?" he finally asked, pulling away when they were away from the woman's sight but not to doors of the grand mansion.

He halted on the edge of its enticing circle of light, next to a fountain, where its gently burbling would cover their words in case anyone was nearby. Fireflies danced around them, weaving in the vines overgrowing the fountain, which was neither mystical nor pretty. It was old and warn, overgrown, the water not nearly enough to fill the pool. Snails crawled on the outside.

"Why didn't you just tell the truth?"

"The truth?" Hannibal let out a dark sound that was not quite a laugh. "I am fairly certain the lady would not have liked that."

"But... You had a ticket?" Will said, confused now.

"I am guessing you thought that woman seemed kind and would have eventually allowed me in." Hannibal said, taking a meaningful step closer.

"You must not forget what I told you in the clock shop: No one here is what they appear. The woman gave a performance, meant to lure you into dropping your guard. They claim they do not want us to get too carried away, but the whole point of Caraval is that it is a game. Legend likes to- play." he continued, stumbling over the last sentence, as if he had been about to say something else and had changed his mind.

"Every guest it chosen for a reason. You are wondering why I lied. It is because that ticket was not meant for a common sailor." he finished, as if he had not stumbled, taking a meaningful step closer.

No. It was meant for a count. Will thought a bit nastily.

A moment of panic seized his heart as he remembered how specific Legend's letter had been. The other ticket was meant for his fiancé. Not the strange man who stood across from him, adjusting his cravat. Will was already risking so much by deciding to stay and play for a day. Pretending to be engaged to Hannibal made it feel as if he were risking being punished. Who knew what he and Hannibal might be pushed to do as part of the game?

Even if Hannibal had helped him earlier, lying for him hand been a mistake, and there were always consequences for that. His entire life was evidence of that in one way or another.

"We need to go back and tell the truth. This won't work. If my father or fiancé finds out that I've behaved as if we're-"

In a flash, the backs of Will's legs hit against the edge of the fountain's pool, the dog being tugged after him, and Hannibal placed his hands on either side of him on the edge, hemming him in. Now all Will could see was Hannibal.

"Will, relax." he said softly, soothingly, but as soon as he spoke relaxing was pretty much impossible.

"I promise, none of this will reach your father or your devoted count. Once we enter that house, it is all just a game. No one inside cares who anyone else is off the island." Hannibal continued in the same tone, adding a firmness to it.

"And how would you know that?" Will demanded.

"I have played the game before." Hannibal answered, giving him a wicked smile.

Then he pushed off the edge of the pool and the lights of the house and the fireflies reappeared, but a chill descended over Will despite his coat.

No wonder Hannibal seemed to be such an expert. He should have thought of that, realized that, before. From the first moment Will had spied Hannibal on Wolf Trap, he had sensed there was more to this alpha than there appeared to be. That trusting him should be done with caution. It seemed he was hiding even more than Will had thought behind the borrowed clothes.

"Is that why you helped me and Abigail get here? So you could play the game again?" Will asked with narrowed eyes.

"If I answered no, and told you that I merely wanted to rescue the pair of you from your father, would you believe me?"

Will shook his head. Heroes didn't exist outside fairy tales. He was very much aware that his fiancé would be no hero, but he would likely be as close to one as Will could get.

Hannibal dipped his chin.

It all made sense now. Why he had known about the island. Why he had crossed it with such purpose instead of lingering in wonder. Why he had been so insistent that he knew where the gates were, what the smoke meant.

"You are looking at me as though I have done something wrong." Hannibal observed.

Will knew it was stupid to be upset. But he did not like being deceived, being lied to. They were nothing to each other, but he had enough of being deceived and lied to last him a lifetime.

"Why did you come back to Caraval?"

"Do I truly need a purpose? Who would not wish to witness the magical Caraval players or to play the game themselves? Win one of the extraordinary prizes?"

"You know, for some reason I don't believe you." Will said with a slight hiss.

It was a purely omega noise; alphas and betas could not hiss. Omegas used it show their utter displeasure and anger, whether that emotion was aimed at an object or a living being. All A/B/O could snarl and growl, but only omegas could hiss, and betas could not purr like an alpha or an omega could. Some alphas also possessed Voices, an ability to adjust their tone and scent to make others obey. Luckily, it was rare, or Will was certain his father would have used it every single day on him and Abigail. Hannibal did not seem to possess one either, or he could have been hiding it.

He might have thought that Hannibal was interested in this year's prize- *a wish*- but something in his gut told him that wasn't true. He had seen no evidence that Hannibal was remotely interested in the prize. Wishes were things of wonder that took a certain amount of

faith, and Hannibal seemed like the type of person who only trusted what he could see and touch. Will was too, in his own way.

The game was different each year, but a few things were said to remain the same. There was always some sort of treasure hunt involving a supposedly magical object- a crown, a goblet, a sword, a pendant, or something similar. And the winners of the previous years were always invited back as guests. Though Will imagined that wouldn't be a draw to Hannibal either, not when he seemed so skilled at finding people who could help get him in.

If Will wasn't sure he even believed in wishes, he could not believe that Hannibal was after one. No, it was not the dream of wishes, or the magical and fantastical wonders in store that drew him to the isle.

"Tell me why you're here." Will demanded.

"I will need you to trust me when I say you are better off not knowing." Hannibal replied, a brief expression flashing across his face.

"I do not want to spoil your fun."

"Yeah, like that won't stay in my head and spoil it. You just don't want me to know the truth, even though I've shared more than I would have liked to with you." Will said moodily.

"No, Will, this time I am telling the truth." Hannibal said with a shake of his head.

He locked eyes with Will, unmoving and unflinching, the sort of gaze that required complete control. Will was uncomfortable. He didn't like eye contact. He always got it wrong. He looked too little or too long, and he noticed little details about other people's eyes that stuck in his head and made him wonder. But in Hannibal's eyes, he didn't see yellow whites or a muscle tic in the skin beneath, he saw that the lazy sailor he had first met had been largely, if not entirely, an act. If he had so desired, Hannibal could have kept up the performance, continued to play the part of the alpha who had happened upon him and Abigail and this entire game by accident. But it was as if he wanted Will to see that there was more to his story than met the eye, even if he wouldn't say what.

Will looked away quickly.

"Not very fond of eye contact, are you?"

"It's the most complicated part of the human interaction."

"I am not going to argue this with you, Will." Hannibal said, straightening suddenly, as if he had come to an important decision.

"Believe me when I saw I have a good reason for wanting to get inside that house. If you wish to turn around and turn me in, I will not stop you or hold it against you. Even though I did save your life today."

"Please, you only did that so I could your ticket into the game."

Hannibal's face went dark.

"Is that what you truly think?" For a moment, he seemed truly wounded.

Will knew he was trying to manipulate him. He had experienced it enough times to recognize the signs. Unfortunately, despite his lengthy history with Hobbs, or perhaps *because* of it, he was never good at evading it. No matter how much he wanted to avoid Hannibal, he couldn't ignore the fact that he *had* saved his life. He would have frozen to death if Hannibal hadn't carried him.

"What about Abigail? This lie might affect your relationship with her."

"I would not call what we had a 'relationship'." Hannibal said, brushing a tuft of dog hair off his coat carelessly, as if that were how he pictured Abigal.

"Your sister was using me just as much as I was using her. I would say it was a fair exchanged."

"And now you're doing the same with me." Will said flatly.

"Do not look so put out about it. I have played the game before, so I can help you. You did offer to be my partner in return for what I did, did you not? You may also enjoy it." Hannibal said, his voice gaining a flirtatious rhythm to it.

"Many omegas would feel lucky to be you." he said, brushing a cool finger against Will's cheek.

"Don't." Will growled, about back away, his skin tingling.

Before he could, however, the dog he had completely forgotten he was holding the rope of body slammed Hannibal across the knees and knocked him back, creating distance between them. Hannibal looked astonished. Will suppressed a purr of satisfaction.

"If we do this, there can't be anymore of... *this*, unless we don't have a choice. I still have a real fiancé. So just before we're saying we're engaged doesn't mean we need to behave like it when we're the only ones around." Will said firmly, establishing his ground rules.

"I take this to mean that you are not, in fact, going to turn me in." Hannibal said, lips curving upward ever so slightly.

He was truly the last person Will wanted to partner with, despite his offer to do so earlier. But he did not want to risk staying on the isle longer than one day. Hannibal had played before, and Will had the feeling he would need his help if he wanted to find his sister quickly.

Just then, a new party of people arrived at the gate. Will could hear the dim clamor of their distant chatter. The echo of the horse's hooves beating the ground.

"Come on." he said to Hannibal, starting off again.

The dog stayed firmly between them, body-checking Hannibal a few times when he ventured too close.

"You may want to inform your bodyguard of your decision." Hannibal said after his third stumble.

"Winston, heel." Will said, the dog looking up at him.

He cocked his head and then obeyed, now seeming to have no problem with Hannibal. Will was surprised that he was already trained.

"Winston?" Hannibal asked with an arched brow.

"Shut it." Will said.

Winston was a Winston. He couldn't explain why.

They reached the house.

Inside, dark cello music began to play, as deep and rich as dark chocolate, the notes haunting. It seeped into the air around them and Will wanted to close his eyes and absorb it as Hannibal's smile turned seductive, filled with immoral, temping promises. An invitation to places and things proper omegas and young ladies didn't think about. Will didn't want to think of the things that smile had probably lured girls and omegas into doing.

"Don't look at me like that." Will snapped.

"And why do you not like to be looked at like that? Associations you have built in the dark fort of your mind?" Hannibal questioned.

"Don't psychoanalyze me." Will warned, his voice gaining a note of dark threat.

"You won't like me when I'm psychoanalyzed."

"I would prefer to learn that for myself, Will. I believe there is more to you than even you realize."

Chapter End Notes

They're really getting inside Caraval in the next chapter, I promise.

Again, polite questions and comments are welcome, no matter how long after posting!

Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

The Night of Caraval Eve

Chapter Notes

Sorry this one took so long! I was having so much trouble writing one character (you'll see who), so I procrastinated. After this chapter, I will be slow to update, because I have two shorter fics I want to get written, but that doesn't mean I'm abandoning it, I promise.

Thanks to everyone reading, commenting, and/or leaving kudos! I love them!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Will had loved his nana and still did, but he was starting to think that her stories of Caraval had not been quite as accurate as he had believed them to be. They had always seemed wonderous and magical and impossible, but little details that Will had always clung to just didn't seem to line up.

Bella had told both him and Abigail about her grand time at Caraval, how she had caught the eyes of all the alphas and the envy of the girls with a purple gown.

She had shown them the gown on several occasions. At the time- before Will had begun to hate the color purple- it had seemed like the most splendid gown Will had ever seen. Dramatic dagged sleeves whose points, when the arms were lowered, nearly touched the ground. A daring neckline that somehow didn't show anything at all. The fabric, he hadn't liked it, but it had been a glorious lavender. Small sparkles seemed to have been embedded in it, winking in the light like stardust. He could never picture his proper, black-and-white wearing nana ever wearing it.

"Can I wear it?" Abigail had asked with wide eyes one day.

"One day, my darling. Maybe you will get to go to Caraval yourself. Or when you're presented to your suitors." Bella had said, smiling.

Will had never seen the gown again. He didn't know what had happened to it. Nana had had family that he and Abigail had never met, and Jack's will had been messy. It was likely one of those unmet relatives had it. But it had always stuck in his memory.

His mind was turning that memory over as the doors to the grand mansion swept open. And in that moment, he questioned whether Nana had ever actually been to a Caraval performance, because he could not imagine that purple gown being of notice in such a wonderous place.

Lush red carpet silenced Will's and Hannibal's steps and did away with the clicking of Winston's nails, soft gold lights adding warm touches to their skin and making Winston look like he was made of the metal. Heat was everywhere, when a moment ago the world had been encased in winter. He could taste, it somehow, crisp, light, and bubbly, like how he had thought the champagne Hobbs had let him take a sip of on his twenty-first birthday a few months ago would taste. This was much better, but Will did not like the sugar taste it left on his tongue, nor the way it made his fingertips tingle. It was... Strange.

"It-" Will broke off as words failed him.

He wanted to say beautiful or magical. But those seemed obvious, not quite right, too common for such a rare sight.

This was because the mansion was not what it had seemed on the outside. The doors their trio had stepped through had not let them into an entrance hall or anything like that it- it had let them out onto a balcony. Although, this balcony was about the size of a small home. Roofed by crystal chandeliers, carpeted in plush rugs the color of fresh blood, it was lined with gilded, curved rails and spindles that arched around matching heavy red drapes.

The drapes swished shut a moment after Will and Hannibal approached, but it was long enough for Will to glimpse the impossible sight beyond.

Hannibal seemed rather unimpressed, though he let out a low chuckle as Will fumbled with his words.

"I forget you have never left your little isle before."

"I think almost anyone would find this sight incredible. And I don't understand it. There were other balconies- Dozens. And below it looked like an elaborate miniature kingdom. But it wasn't." Will said, a little bit of excitement creeping into his voice.

"Did you expect it to be a normal house?"

"Well, no." Will admitted.

It was bigger than any building he had ever seen; he had called it a mansion because it looked like a house, but it had seemed more the size of a castle or a palace. But not nearly large enough to contain the world he had glimpsed, which he knew was no model. Unable to contain his desire to look, Will went to the curtains and reached out about to pull them carelessly back, but hesitated for a moment.

Hannibal stepped forward and drew them back a fraction.

"Are we supposed to do that?" Will asked.

"They were likely closed for a reason, a test to see whether or not we will pull them back and peek." Hannibal said, pulling the curtain back wider.

Will was sure this was breaking some sort of rule, that they might get thrown out for breaking one before the game even began or even- his stomach clenched- before they found Abigail, but he moved closer despite the fear. Spread out below them was another fairy tale town, but this one was even more dramatic than the last, and was not abandoned. It was alive with lights and colors and moving shapes of all sorts, Winston shoving his head between the spindles of the rail to look, too. There were bright pointy roofs, roofs that sloped downward with tiles that appeared to be made of jewels, roofs covered in greenery. Towers cover in moss and vines. Bridges that gleamed of rare woods and precious metals. Glimmering canals, shining houses and shops, glistening stone streets, and shimmering fountains, all lit by candled lamps that hung everywhere, looking as though the stars had been flung down on the scene below.

In reality, it was no bigger than the town on Wolf Trap, but it felt immensely bigger, like how words did when an exclamation point was tacked on. Everything seemed so vibrant and alive, in a way Will had never seen before.

"How do they fit an entire world in a house?" Will asked, thinking that even magic couldn't explain this.

"It's all just an elaborate theater." Hannibal said, gaze flicking to around them, not below them.

Will realized he was right. With the multitude of balconies and their red-velvet curtains forming a ring above the town below, it did look like a theater. A theater that could have held everyone populating the town below. Will's stomach clenched. Sometimes it took him an entire day to track down Abigail on their father's estate. How would he ever find her here?

"E-excuse me." a voice stammered out, coming from behind them.

"Shut the curtains."

Will turned immediately, startled, and Winston pulled his head back, but Hannibal took his time in releasing the curtain. He did not seem as terrified of breaking rules as Will did, but Will had grown up knowing a broken rule meant terrible things.

"And who are you?" Hannibal asked, looking the newcomer up and down appraisingly.

"P-Peter." the man said, his head twisted away from them.

At first glance, Will had thought Peter was close in age to Hannibal, but he was only a year or two older than Will himself. He wore crisp gray pants and matching tails, but as he looked closer Will realized that Peter was younger than he had thought, his tilted top hat obscuring his face in shadow. He had fine mustache and beneath the hat, Will realized part of his head was shaved, the edge of a scar just visible on his skull.

He was a beta, his scent of mild wild mint, soothing and pleasant, and Will watched as he did not really look at them, figuring it out as the beta accidentally knocked his hat to the floor when he tried to adjust it. The scar on his head looked as though it had come from a horse's hoof, and Will had seen the type of injury and the results of it before, after a groom had gotten injured on the estate.

"Why are you here?" Hannibal asked politely.

"Go over rules and questions." Peter answered, his voice sort of shaky and odd.

Winston stretched to the end of the rope and Peter looked down at him, then twisted oddly and patted the dog on the head after his fingers were thoroughly sniffed.

Will knew that for Peter, with the injury he had suffered, his brain did not work as it once had. Now touch and looking had to happen as separate events for him to process it correctly. He was surprised, but pleasantly so, to see someone with such an injury able to work at Caraval. It made him warm up to Legend a bit unintentionally in his head. Hobbs had fired the groom this had happened to on the estate.

"Nice dog. I-is he yours?" Peter asked, finishing with Winston and twisting back toward them.

"Yes, he is." Will said, saying it firmly.

Winston was his now. He would convince Hobbs to let him keep him when he got back; maybe suggest it as a wedding gift, since it was traditional for a father to present his child with a gift close to their wedding. Or, since he would have to play along with the kidnapping ruse, say that Winston had helped protect him and Abigail and refuse to be parted.

Peter cleared his throat and started past Hannibal, beginning to speak.

Will tuned him out. He just wanted to be let in already, wanted to find Abigail. Knowing her, she had probably already find a new kind of trouble to get involved in.

"You may want to pay attention." Hannibal said, nodding at Peter.

"We already heard it. The woman at the gates said it would be repeated."

"Are you sure it's the same?" Hannibal questioned in a whisper.

This made Will pay attention.

"Once inside, there'll be a mystery to solve. Clues will be around to help you in the game. We want you to be swept away, but don't get swept away. Don't go too far." Peter said, reciting from memory, unlike the woman.

"What happens if we get swept too far?" Will asking, thinking that Nana had really sugarcoated things.

It seemed Caraval was even darker than he had realized, but part of him tingled with anticipation at the realization.

"You die or go mad." Peter replied, as if this was obvious.

Will thought for a moment he had misheard him, and then again when he next spoke.

"If you cheat or try to take more than is yours, the island doesn't like. The rude people disappear." he added.

This was rather alarming, actually, and Peter reached into his jacket pocket, removing two folded pieces of paper. He held out the creamy objects as if for them to read, but the script was impossibly tiny and loopy, make it impossible to read.

"N-Need your blood at the bottom."

"For what?" Will asked, startled.

"To confirm you heard the rules twice. That the Caraval Estate and Master Legend aren't responsible for injuries, disappearances, or madness. Nope." Peter answered.

"You said nothing that happens inside is real." Will said, narrowing his eyes.

"Accidents happen. Rarely happen. You can watch if you don't want to play. Watching is fine." Peter said, his tone making it sound like Will was worrying over nothing.

Maybe he was. Maybe it was just to cover themselves in the events of something unlikely happening. If Abigail were here, Will could imagine her saying, *If you're only staying for a day, you'll regret sitting and watching*.

But the idea of a contract sealed in blood was a little unsettling to Will.

Though if Abigail was playing and he decided to observe, he might not be able to find her until the game was over, and there would be no getting back to Wolf Trap in time to marry the count. Despite the warnings and instructions, Will was still unsure of the particulars of the game. What was here and what Nana had told him were not lining up. She had given Will romantic impressions that were off now, painted pretty pictures of her youth.

Will glanced at Hannibal out the corner of his eye. Without hesitation, he stabbed his fingertip on the spike of a ring Peter was wearing on the hand he had extended, pressing a bloody print to the bottom of the contract at once.

Will remembered a few years ago when Caraval had stopped trailing. When they had apparently set up on the isle. A woman had died. Will didn't know the details of what had happened. He had always assumed it was a terrible accident, unrelated to the game, but now he wondered if she had become too wrapped up in the illusion of Caraval.

However, Will had played his father's distorted games for years, even before his dad had died, even before he had realized it. He knew when he was being deceived and he couldn't imagine becoming so wrapped up in a game or confused with reality that he would lose his

life or go insane. Neither would Abigail. Still, that didn't mean he wasn't a bit apprehensive as he extended his hand. He knew better than to assume that anything came without a cost.

He pricked his finger quickly on the spike of Peter's ring and pressed his finger to the bottom of the paper, something odd happening when he did. For a moment, it was like all the lights went out. When he pulled his finger back, it was as if the world had become brighter. He felt as though he could taste the color of the curtains. Chocolate cake drizzled in a rich red wine sauce.

Will had only ever had one sip of red wine and a little champagne, but he imagined nothing, alcohol or otherwise, could bring on such an iridescent feeling like this. Was it euphoria? Anticipation? Nerves? He didn't know. He had never felt this way before.

"The games begins at sundown tomorrow. Ends at sunrise on the nineteenth. Everyone has five nights to play. You get a clue to start you on your journey. You have to earn the other clues yourself. Lots of people this year. Go quick, or they'll get the prize before you." Peter said, his hand twitching near his head for a moment, as if batting at an invisible bug.

Twisting again, he offered them each a card.

It read, *The Muskrat Inn*.

"Mine is the same." Hannibal said, peeking at Will's card.

"Is this the clue?" Will asked doubtfully.

"Lodgings. Clues are in the rooms. You need to get there before daybreak." Peter answered, giving Winston another pat.

Will was almost tempted to ask if Winston needed to sign a contact, but he didn't. Peter seemed nice and that sounded mean.

"What happens at daybreak?" he asked warily.

Peter did not answer. He finished with Winston and went to the curtains, pulling a thick braided golden rope. The curtains parted and revealed the place they had peeked at before, gray birds taking flight into the sky. More of the balconies around them were having their curtains pulled back; everyone was being let in at once.

A rush of excitement, like when a fish bit his lure, went through Will. This was it. This was Caraval. He had pictured it more often than he had his own wedding (because the latter had seemed too intimidating). Even if he could only stay a day, he knew it would likely be difficult to leave.

"Don't let anything trick you." Peter told them.

Then he climbed on the balcony's rail and jumped.

Will shouted, dropping Winston's rope, and was about to rush to the rail when Hannibal caught him.

"It is all right, Will. Look. All the performers are expected to be dramatic in one way or another." Hannibal said, pointing.

Will stared, dumbfounded, as it appeared Peter's suit jacket turned into great feathered wings, carrying him up into the sky with the birds... Who might have been other hosts.

It seemed the tricks had already begun.

"Come." Hannibal said, releasing his arm and striding from the balcony, purpose in each step.

"Had you been listening, you would have heard he said that everything locks at sunrise. The game uses a reverse curfew. The doors will close at sunrise and will not unlock again until sunset. We do not have much time to get to our rooms."

He stopped walking. At his feet, a trapdoor stood open, which was probably how Peter had snuck up on them. It led to a winding black staircase, the whorl of a shell, lit only by spaced sconces with dripping white candles.

"Will-" Hannibal stopped him at the threshold.

For a moment something flashed through his eyes, the way it had before he had left Will in the clock shop.

"What?" Will asked, tilting his head.

"We need to hurry."

Hannibal let Will and Winston go first, though after a few flights Will was wishing Hannibal had gone first, because he could feel the other man directly behind him, Winston bounding down the steps so fast Will was nearly tugged head-long after him. Hannibal encouraged him to hurry up. Will bit back a growl.

"Will, we still need time to find our rooms by the time we get to the bottom. If we do not make it there by sunrise, we-"

"We'll be out in the cold, I know." Will snapped.

He had thought the balcony was ten stories high, but now it seemed like a hundred. Part of his problem were the unfamiliar clothes. They were comfortable despite their elegant appearance, but he was not used to moving in them, and try as he might to envision what he usually wore, they stubbornly remained the way they were. He increased his pace, letting Winston's eager tugging help propel him along, and Hannibal bounded on his heels. All three of them were panting by the time they reached the bottom, and Will's new coat felt too warm.

Down from the balcony and outside, the air was crisper and a little damp. This was from the canals. From the height, Will had not realized how many there were. Every other street was a canal, populated with slender striped boats that glided across their surface, all helmed by young men or women about his own age or a little younger.

But there was no sign of Abigail. Where was she? Why hadn't she waited for them?

Hannibal got them a boat right away, aquamarine with red stripes, the young woman steering dressed to match. Her scent was blocked by a heady perfume, so Will could not tell whether or not she was an alpha, beta, or omega. Her blonde hair was pulled back in a high ponytail, her lips painted the same vibrant red as the boat. Will noticed them part slightly at the sight of Hannibal.

"Where can I take you lovely gentlemen?" she asked.

"Oh, I believe you are the lovely one." Hannibal said with smile made of sin, his voice oozing charm.

Will wanted to roll his eyes.

"Could you kindly get us to Muskrat Inn before sunrise?"

"I can take you wherever you need to go, as long as you can pay." the girl said, emphasizing the word *pay*, reinforcing what Will had guessed in the clock shop- Coins were not the only currency used here.

"We were told our first ride of the night would be free. My fiancé, Will Graham, is a special guest of Master Legend." Hannibal explained, pulling Will close.

"Is that so?" the girl said, looking them over with an observant eye.

Will was sure she did not believe them, but then she beckoned them on board.

"I don't to disappoint Master Legend's special guests."

Hannibal climbed in nimbly and held out his hand to Will. Despite its delicate and sleek appearance, the vessel appeared much studier than their last, with plush red cushions on benches, but Will could not bring himself to move.

"This one will not sink." Hannibal reassured him.

"That's not what I'm thinking about. Where is Abigail? What if she's waiting for us somewhere else and we leave her behind?"

"Then I hope someone told her about the curfew."

"You really don't care about her at all, do you?"

"On the contrary. I do care for her, otherwise I would not wish for someone to tell her about the curfew and that it is almost sunrise." Hannibal said, voice betraying a note of impatience.

"You do not need to worry, *mylimasis*. They have likely placed her at the same inn as us."

"Yeah, and what if they haven't?" Will challenged.

"You are still more likely to find her by boat. We will move faster this way."

"He is right, sir. Daybreak is coming fast. Even if you did find your sister, you would never be able to walk to The Muskrat before dawn breaks. If you tell me what she looks like, I can keep an eye on her as we go. If we see her, she can hop in." the girl interjected.

Will wanted to argue. Even if he couldn't find Abigail before sunup, he wanted to do everything in his power to try. He was her brother, he was supposed to protect her. He imagined this was the sort of place someone could get lost and never be found. And Abigail's penchant for trouble... The isle taking rule-breakers and such unsettled him.

But Hannibal and this girl were right; they would move much faster in the boat. Will had no idea how long it had been since he had been outrunning the setting sun, he still had the suspicion that time moved differently in this curious place.

He climbed in, carrying Winston, and the dog snuggled against him, sniffing Will's scent glands for all he was worth. They moved surprisingly fast, Will describing Abigail as they went, looking himself.

"My sister is shorter than me and a few years younger. Very pretty. Her face is a bit round, and she has auburn hair about this long." he said, holding his hand at the length of Abigail's hair.

Will looked like his dad. Abigail looked sort of like their father, and really no one (though Hobbs claimed she looked like his mother).

"That auburn hair will make her easier to find." the girl said, though Will was pretty sure she spent most of her time looking at Hannibal and, uncomfortably, him.

Hannibal was unhelpful. He was watching the streets with a hunter's eye, but Will had the feeling he was hunting for something that was distinctly not Abigail.

"Is it possible for you to row faster?" he asked, a muscle fluttering in his jaw.

"For someone who isn't paying, you're awfully demanding." the girl teased, giving Hannibal a wink, but his expression didn't change.

"What's wrong with you?" Will asked.

"We are running out of time."

A shadow fell across them as several of the lanterns lining the canals went out. The boat sailed faster, and the candles kept going out, their smoke laying a haze over the canal and the few remaining people on the cobbled streets.

"Is that how you tell time here? The lanterns go out as it gets closer to dawn?" Will asked, Hannibal nodding.

A sense of foreboding went through Will as more lanterns died, Winston lifting his head. He began to whine, then a growl rumbled through Will.

The boat all but crashed into a rickety wooden dock. At the end of it, a searing green door watched them like the eye of some menacing beast. Ivy clung to the brick walls around it, and though the building was mostly swallowed in the lingering night, two dying lanterns hung on either side of the door, illuminating a sign. He would have expected a muskrat. But instead, it featured a rearing boar surrounded by vines, a crown at the top, the words *The Muskrat Inn* curving along the bottom.

Hannibal was already out of the boat. He grabbed Will as Will hoisted a growling and barking Winston into his arms, hauling him onto the dock.

"Faster!"

One of the lanterns beside the green door snuffed out, the door dimming as well. It was barely visible as Hannibal yanked it open and shoved Will inside, Winston still tight in his arms.

Will stumbled, nearly dropping the dog. But before Hannibal could follow, the door slammed shut. Wood crashed against wood, metal sliding home, as a bolt was thrown into place. Leaving Hannibal trapped outside, with whatever was making Winston howl.

Chapter End Notes

Yeah, so you probably guessed that it was Peter I was having trouble with. I think I did a terrible job writing him, so I'm really sorry if I messed him up. 😭 I just love his character so much that I had to stick him in here. The girl in the boat was Miriam; not sure if that was clear.

And, oh, the music I imagine playing is the cello music Will played in Fromage. I love that music. So haunting.

Again, polite comments and questions are welcome, no matter how long after posting.

Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Caraval Eve

Chapter Notes

Sorry this took so long! I lied a bit in the last note. My 'short fics' turned out to be 23,145 words collectively and one took me a month to write while this chapter took me about an hour and a half altogether... But I'm back now! Please enjoy this chapter!

Oh, there is a slightly offensive word in this chapter, with the phrase 'omega slut' used. Will throws out there in relation to how people might think of him, no one calls him that or anything. Just a heads up!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"NO!" Will cried, dropping Winston now.

He tried to yank the door open, but an older beta with graying brown hair was already sliding a heavy lock through the bolt.

"You can't just lock it! My-" Will protested, stumbling over the words instinctively.

Winston was prancing and whining, looking at the door, a low growl mixing with the whines. Whatever was out there wasn't good. But still, Will hesitated. If he said the word, it somehow made the lie more real than when Hannibal it did. It made him almost feel like he was being unfaithful to the count, which didn't make sense, but his father's words were also digging in his head. Hannibal had promised that nothing that happened during the game would get back to his father and the count, but how could he be sure?

But... Winston was reacting as if there were some kind of threat and Hannibal had been desperate to get inside, and he had the feeling that the days on the island could be worse than the nights. He remembered the empty village and deadly cold. If Hannibal was in danger, it was only because he had pushed *Will* ahead of himself. He had taken a risk so Will wouldn't be in danger. Will owed him for that.

"My fiancé." he said, grabbing the rope around Winston's neck. "He's out there. You can't lock him out."

"I'm sorry, but the rules are the rules. If you don't make it in by dawn, you don't get to play." the innkeeper said regretfully.

Don't get to play?

Those weren't the rules Will had heard, but he hadn't listened to them all. No wonder Hannibal had been so anxious.

"I'm sorry, honey. I hate to separate couples, but if you don't make it inside once the sun's up and the door is locked for the day, you-" the beta began, shaking his head apologetically.

"The sun's not up yet! It's false dawn. Just light. The sun isn't up. That doesn't count." Will argued.

The innkeeper looked at him with pity, but Will didn't think he was going to change his mind.

He tried to think of what Hannibal would do, if their positions were reverse. He imagined Hannibal would try to charm his way into getting what he wanted or might not just care. But despite leaving Will in the shop, he had come back. He had made sure Will didn't freeze to death had made sure he got into Caraval, made sure he made it through this door. Hannibal hadn't abandoned him, so Will wasn't going to abandon the alpha.

He took a deep breath and mustered courage he only reserved for protecting Abigail, when the danger was worth the risk.

"I think you've made a mistake. My name is Will Graham, and my fiancé and I are special guests of Master Legend." Will said with confidence he somehow found.

The innkeeper's eyes widened, and his coffee-like scent strengthened as he hurriedly undid the lock.

"Sorry, you should have started with that!"

The door flew open. The other side was a hopeless, bottomless shade of black, like the blackness behind Will's eyes before his nightmares began.

"Hannibal!" Will said.

He had expected to find him right on the other side of the door, but there was nothing but the unrelenting blackness.

"Hannibal?" Will called again, fear entering his heart as Winston snarled, hackles raised, teeth bared, tongue flicking between them.

"Will?"

Will couldn't see him, but he could hear Hannibal's boots thumping on the dock, coming toward him, his scent tainted with fear, matching Will's pounding heart and his own scent. Then Hannibal burst from the darkness, slightly disarrayed, his scent washing over Will.

Will's heart continued to pound even now that Hannibal was inside. The fire that lit the inn space was dim, barely smoldering logs making it nearly impossible to see, but in the flickering remains of the light Will swore that Hannibal's face was haunted, matching his scent, like he had lost something valuable or had seen something horrifying. It felt like the darkness was still clinging to him. Like his hair was wet with it and it was dripping off the ends in dark, thick drops, like spilled ink.

In the distance, bells began to toll, heralding the dawn. If Will had hesitated even a few seconds longer, it would have been too late to save Hannibal. Will had the sudden urge to reach out and grab him in some manner, just to reassure himself that Hannibal was really here. He might have been wary of Hannibal, but until he found Abigail, the alpha was all he had here.

"You scared me." Will admitted.

And it appeared he wasn't the only one.

The innkeeper's face was white as chalk as he secured the door for a second time, and Winston was dancing around Hannibal's feet.

Hannibal moved closer, pressing his hand into the small of Will's back as he did so, the touch light and respectful.

"How did you manage to convince him to allow me in?" he asked curiously.

Will was suddenly reluctant to admit the truth. He knew Hannibal would enjoy it.

"I, uh, told him it wasn't daybreak yet." he muttered.

Hannibal lifted a skeptical brow.

"I also said we were getting married." Will added reluctantly.

My cunning boy. Hannibal mouthed, his lips parting as he leaned closer.

Will stiffened. For a moment, he thought Hannibal was going to kiss him, and if he did that, Will would not hesitate to use a move on him his dad had taught him for the very purpose of holding off unwanted alpha advances.

"Thank you." Hannibal whispered, his warm breath caressing Will's ear, and Will shivered as his hand pressed harder against his back.

Something about the whole thing felt very intimate, even more intimate than a kiss would have been.

Will shifted away, but Hannibal's hand remained against his spine, keeping him close as he turned to the innkeeper. The beta had moved over to a huge green desk that took up most of the small foyer.

"And thank you. I appreciate the kindness you have shown us tonight." Hannibal said politely.

"Oh, it wasn't a problem, really." the beta said, though Will could smell that he was still shaken.

"Like I said to your fiancé, I hate to break up couples. I actually have special arrangements for you two. You can call me Jimmy, by the way." he continued.

He rummaged in his desk before pulling out two glass keys, one etched with an 8, the other a 9.

"Easy enough to find, upstairs on the left." He winked as he handed over the keys.

Will frowned at that. He didn't like winking. Sly alphas had winked at him all the time on Wolf Trap, hoping to take the virginity his father had so determinedly sold off, trying to seduce a naive omega. His father had also winked from time to time, in a mockery of playfulness, usually when something nasty was about to happen or he had already done it. Will doubted this mild-mannered beta had done anything nefarious to their rooms, but the matching glass keys paired with the little gesture made him put his guard up.

It was probably in his head, he told himself. Maybe the keys were part of the game as well. Maybe they unlocked other things and the words 'special arrangements' were a veiled clue.

Or maybe they just had good views. Special guest quarters.

Jimmy explained that each room had a small bathroom attached with a tub, toilet, and sink, and Will was startled by the luxury. Even on his father's estate, bathrooms were in specific places for multiple people to use, or baths had to be taken with water hauled up from the kitchens or boiled in the room's fire.

"On the right there is the Primavera Tavern. Closes one hour after sunrise, opens one hour before sunset."

Inside the tavern, lively green light spilled from emerald chandeliers, which were shaped to resemble hang boughs of leaves. They hung above tables of glass carved so the single leg looked like a tree trunk, the surfaces smooth but patterned with leaves beneath. The chairs were carved with reliefs of flowers and vines. It smelled of stale drink and the air was hung with even staler conversation. It would soon close for the day. A few patrons remained, finishing off drinks and meals, and Will peered hopefully in, but none of them had auburn hair.

"I am sure you will find her tomorrow." Hannibal said.

"Maybe she's already in her room." Will said, which would be a miracle.

He turned to Jimmy.

"Have you seen a girl? About seventeen, this tall, with auburn hair and blue eyes? Her name is Abigail Hobbs." he asked, holding up a hand to Abigail's height.

Something flashed over Jimmy's face and Will knew in an instant he recognized the description and the name.

"Sorry, kids, but I can't tell you who else is staying here." he said quickly.

"She's my sister."

"I still can't help. If she's here, you'll have to find her on your own. Rules of the game." Jimmy said, flashing a look between Hannibal and Will.

"But-"

Hannibal's hand pressed harder against his back, his breath tickling Will's ear.

"He's already done us one favor tonight. We can not expect another."

Will wanted to argue, but something in Hannibal's expression stopped him. Something in it went beyond caution, border lining fear.

"I know you wish to find your sister, and I understand that need. On this isle, secrets have worth beyond measure. They are currency. Be careful of giving yours away too freely. If people know what you want most, they can use it against you." he warned, hair falling over his eyes.

"Come." he added, heading for the stairs.

Will knew it was dawn, but the crooked halls of Muskrat Inn smelled of night, of sweat and smoke mixed with alcohol and lingering breath from conversations that hung like specs of dusts in the air before the words faded completely. The doors, despite bearing numbers, were in no particular order. It was like a child who knew what numbers were but did not know their order had run down the hall and slapped them on the doors. Room two was on the second floor. Room five's sky-blue door came after eleven's raspberry one. Will glimpsed forty-two after he and Hannibal mistakenly went to the fifth floor. How big was this place?

The halls of the fourth floor were covered in velvet paper stripped thickly in cream and black and Will stayed away from them; he hated the feel of velvet, and the way the stripes looked was disorienting. They finally found their rooms in the middle of the hall, neighbors to each other.

Will lingered at the rounded door to room eight while Hannibal watched him.

It felt as if they had spent more than one crazy day together. The sailor was not actually a horrible companion. Will knew he likely wouldn't have made it this far without his help.

"I was thinking... Tomorrow-" he started.

"If I see your sister, I will tell her you are looking for and what room you are in." Hannibal said politely, but it was also a stark dismissal.

So it was going to be like that.

Will shouldn't have been surprised or upset that this was the end of their partnership. Hannibal had claimed that he wished to help him, but he had also learned that if the alpha wanted something, he could and likely would do whatever he could to get it. He didn't know when he had started expecting more. Or why. And he also knew he owed Hannibal several times over for all that he had done.

He thought about what Hannibal had told him in the clock shop, that he had thought too highly of him if he thought he cared about Abigail. He used people. His use of Will had been mutually beneficial, but he had used him all the same. Will remembered his first impression of him, tall and handsome but dangerous, like a beautiful weapon or poison placed in a pretty bottle. His dad had warned him about alphas. He knew how people could be. He was an idiot for thinking Hannibal could be different.

It was better to stay away from him. Safer. Hannibal might have helped him today, but that mean Will should let his guard down; he was clearly here for his own purposes. Not that Will expected theirs to match, exactly, but still. And it didn't matter, because after he found Abigail tomorrow, he wouldn't be alone, or on the island much longer.

"Thanks." he said curtly and swept into his room without another word, Winston on his heels.

A fire was already lit in the hearth, warm and bright, throwing shards of orange and coppper light againsts walls that were deep blue, trimmed in white. There was a massive canopy bed, bigger than any bed Will had ever seen. Covered in white sheets and a matching blue quilt, it looked inviting, if a little fancier than what he preferred. It was sheltered by gauzy white curtains that stirred in some draft. Will's exhaustion tugged at him, urging him to get in the bed, but he pushed it aside. He opened the door to the small bathroom and looked down at the Winston, who was certainly dirty, and looked like he was partially diseased compared to the cleanliness of the room.

"Bathtime." he told the dog, who pricked his ears.

Stripping off his jacket and shirt, Will discovered that the pipes connected to the tub produced both hot and cold water, and he began to fill the tub with a warm mixture, finding lavender-scented and neutral soaps. The tub filled quickly and there thick, fluffy towels available, Will untying the rope from Winston's neck. The dog's throat rumbled ever so slightly, the kind of growl given before the dog knew the whole situation, his eyes fixed on something. Will looked and froze.

The wall had moved.

Blinking, wondering if it was a trick of the light, with straightened and wished he had a knife, because the wall was definitely moving. He grabbed the poker from beside the hearth.

"No." he said a moment later as Hannibal strode into the room, a narrow door next to the dark wardrobe, camouflaged by the wallpaper, closing behind him.

"How did you get in here?" Will demanded as Winston wagged his tail, but he already knew the answer.

The wink. The matching keys. The special arrangements.

"He gave us the same room on purpose!" Will growled.

"You did a remarkable job of convincing her that we are in love." Hannibal said, glancing at the bed.

Will's face burned hotter than the fire.

"I didn't say that. I just said we were engaged." Will said and almost hit Hannibal with the poker anyway when he chuckled.

"This is *not funny*. We can't stay in here together. If anyone finds out, I'm ruined. The omega slut." Will said, spitting the last two words out.

"Will, you are being dramatic again. Not everything will ruin your life. Your father may have instilled certain views in you, but not everyone sees the world as he does. It is not unusual for people in our... Position to share a room, especially so close to marriage." Hannibal said calmly.

But if Hobbs found out, if the count found it, it could end Will's engagement in a heartbeat. His father had never actually said, but Will knew his virginity had to be part of the deal. Virgin omegas were a premium in the arranged marriage market.

"You met my father. If anyone found-"

"No one will find out. I imagine that is why there are two doors with different numbers. And I will be a perfect gentleman." Hannibal promised, crossing to the bed and settling on it.

"You can't sleep there." Will protested.

"Why not? It is very comfortable, and there is enough room for both of. " Hannibal said, removing his boots. He slid off his coat and begun to unbutton his shirt.

"Stop that." Will snapped.

"Will, I will not touch you. I swear. But I am not sleeping on the floor or an uncomfortable chair merely because you are an omega. We can share the bed and not touch. Your dog can sleep between us. I, personally, do not care for animals in the bed, but if you would like to use your lovely companion as a buffer, you may." Hannibal said, adding, "And you are more undressed than I am."

Blushing, Will snatched up his shirt and yanked it back on.

"I am not sharing a bed with you or any alpha." he said firmly.

Hannibal continued working on the buttons of his shirt, ignoring Will's words, and Will was ashamed of the fact that his eyes were as drawn to Hannibal as they had been in the clock shop.

"I'm going to bathe the dog and then see if Jimmy has another room available." Will said, scooping up Winston.

"And if he does not?"

"Then I'll sleep in the hall." Or the tub with the towels and the dog and the door locked, if he had to.

Despite claiming to be a gentleman, Hannibal did not protest, nor did he offer to find other sleeping arrangements. Will turned, hearing something soft hit the floor. Probably Hannibal's shirt. He locked himself in the bathroom and put Winston in the tub, removing his clothes again. He scrubbed the dog until the water ran clean off him, listening hard for Hannibal on the other side, but there was no noise. When Winston was clean, Will toweled him and then washed himself, getting off all the grime of the day.

He didn't like to, but he put the rope back on Winston, until he found something better. Just a collar, maybe, or a leash. He opened the door and stepped out, heading for the round door without looking at the bed.

"Wait just a moment, Will." Hannibal said.

A square lined with glinting gold landed at Will's feet. An envelope. His name was written across the front in elegant script.

"It was on the bed. I imagine it is your first clue."

Chapter End Notes

Yay! Jimmy! I love Team Sassy Science and while Jimmy will only have a background role, he's here. Also just liked the Will bathing Winston scene, so I had to throw it in.

The room is based off Hannibal's bedroom, as seen in season 2. As for the one bed trope and it actually being big enough for the both of them, we'll revisit that later.

Polite questions and comments are always welcome, no matter how long after posting!

Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

The Night of Caraval Eve

Chapter Notes

I have no excuse. Will is probably a bit dumb in this chapter and I reserve the right that Will isn't always the most observant even he supposedly is, is sleep deprived, and had a wild day.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Nana had always said that the world of Caraval was Legend's great playground. No words were spoken that he didn't hear. Not a whisper escaped his ears, not a flicker of shadow went unseen by his eyes. No one ever saw Legend- or if they did they never knew it was him- but Legend saw and heard all during Caraval.

Will could swear that he felt that all-seeing gaze on him as he stepped into the hall with Winston. He sensed it in the way the candlelit seemed to glow brighter, like eyes flashing with interest, as he examined his message.

The envelope looked the same as every one he had received so far, cream with gold decoration and thick with mystery, a faint sweet, floral scent clinging to it.

When he opened it, a shower of red rose petals fell into his palm, like drops of blood, along with a key. Delicate green glass. Similar to the one he had been given for his room, but this one was dainty in comparison, and had a five etched into it. Attached to it was a narrow black ribbon, a tag dangling off it, and on that tag was a single name: Abigail Hobbs.

Will knew this was supposed to be his first clue. But it felt more like a gift from Legend, like the invitations and the clothes. Will had found it difficult to believe that he was special in the clock shop, but maybe he was starting to feel a touch of Caraval magic, as he found himself secretly hoping that Legend was actually treating him differently, taking care of him by showing him where his sister was. For a moment Will felt like everything was going to all right, and that he had been mistaken about the darkness in Caraval.

He flew down the hall, Winston happily running with him, until he reached the steps to the third floor, where room five was for some reason located. It came right after room eleven, its door sky blue with strips of glass that were so fogged and manipulated that it was impossible

to see through them set in the upper part. The knob, however, shimmered like a blue sapphire, and the paint was gorgeous, the fogged glass actually looking more like crystal as will got a good look at it. Perfectly suited for Abigail's tastes.

Will began to use his key, thinking of all the things that he would say to his sister, but the breathing on the other side of the door was too heavy for Abigail. The scent of honeysuckle was on the other side, but it was also joined by another scent, cinnamon and something Will couldn't quite place. Prickles raced down Will's neck and spine as he froze, sniffing deeply, leaning forward and placing his ear against the door.

Thud.

Something heavy dropped to the floor.

This was followed by a groan.

"Abby-" Will said, reaching for the knob. "Are you all right?"

"Will?" Abigail's voice sounded strained, out of breath.

"Yeah, it's me. I'm coming in!"

"No- Don't!"

There was another thud, and the scents on the other side of the door shifted a bit. Winston growled.

"Abigail, what's going on?" Will demanded, alarmed.

"Nothing- just- *don't* come in here!"

"Abigail, if something's wrong-"

"Nothing's wrong! I'm just- just- busy-" Abigail's voice broke off.

Will grabbed the knob. Something was wrong. Abigail didn't sound like herself.

"Will!" Abigail said, voice loud and clear, as if she knew Will's hand had closed around the knob. "If you open that door, I'm never speaking to you again."

Her tone was low and serious, a threat, and this time, it was echoed by a deeper voice. A young man's voice.

"You heard your sister, *Will*." he said.

The words struck Will like a heavy blow, hitting him and cutting him in a way nothing could protect him from.

He released the knob, tugged on Winston's lead, and hurried away with his face hot, feeling all kinds of foolish. He had been worried sick about Abigail this whole time, but obviously

his sister hadn't been the least bit concerned about him. She probably hadn't even thought of him. Not when there was a young man in her bed.

Will shouldn't have been surprised; his sister had always been a bit wilder than him, and it had been growing in the past two years. Abigail liked the taste of trouble, though she thought of it as adventure. But it wasn't that that hurt Will so much. Abigail was the most important person in the world to Will and had always been, always would be, and it broke something in him each time he realized it was not the same for Abigail.

After his dad had died, the soft parts of their father had started to disappear, and when Abigail's mother had died, they had gone away completely. His rules went from strict to severe, and so did the consequences for failing to obey. It would have been different if Johnathan hadn't gotten sick. If that thief hadn't stabbed Louise. Will had vowed to never leave his little sister alone, to always protect her and take care of her. Even though he wasn't that much older than Abigail, he didn't trust anyone else to take care of her. Certainly not Hobbs, even though he knew their father did love them, in his own way, underneath it all. But while he had sheltered Abigail, he had also spoiled her. Abigail often thought only of herself, or didn't realize that her actions had consequences, especially since her mother had died.

When he reached the end of the hall, Will slid down the wall to the floor. Floorboards rubbed awkwardly beneath him, and Winston snuffled his fingers before curling up beside him. It was colder on this level than it had been on the stairs. Or maybe that was just Abigail's dismissal. She had chosen someone else over Will. A young man whose name Abigail probably didn't know. Probably an alpha, too. While Will often feared alphas and men as well, Abigail seemed to run right toward them, always going after the wrong ones, seeking love opposite of their father's.

Will thought about returning to his room, warm with the fire and those blankets. But all the warmth in the world could not convince him to share a room with Hannibal. Though Winston already seemed protective of him, Will wasn't sure if even sleeping in the chair or on the floor was worth it. If anyone found out, even if he returned with his virginity intact, it could ruin everything with just simple rumor. If Hobbs found out, Abigail would hurt so badly. And Will was not prepared to put his entire trust in Hannibal's hand yet.

He could have gone down and asked Jimmy for another room, but he knew that was not a wise idea, especially when he had made such a fuss over Hannibal before. Stupid Hannibal.

Stupid. Stupid. Stupid... Will thought venomously, but soon the words turned internal, directed at himself, and were an awful lot less venomous and almost tearful in ways. He hated it. But he let the word drift through his head until his eyes drifted shut.

"Sir...?" A hand touched his shoulder, bringing him back into the world of the waking.

Startled, Will jerked and bared his teeth, eyes flying open, almost instantly shutting them. The man in front of him held a lantern too close to his face. Will could feel the warmth on his skin, even though it was a safe distance away.

"He must be drunk." a young woman's voice said.

"I am not drunk." Will protested, opening his eyes again.

The man with the lantern appeared caught somewhere between Will's own age and Hannibal's. But unlike the sailor, this man was polished, his pale suit speaking of wealth, though his hair looked like it hadn't been bothered to be brushed. His face was somewhat round and, to Will's eyes, plain-looking, his eyes almost hidden by the light reflecting off his glasses. His scent was sandalwood and cedar, alpha notes striking Will sharply.

There was something in his face that made Will immediately wary. No, not his face, his eyes. He couldn't place what it was and though his expression seemed innocent enough, his eyes were examining Will in a way Will did not like. He also realized that Winston was pressed against his legs, vibrating his entire body with a low, dangerous snarl.

"There was a mix-up with my room. I was on my way to talk to the innkeeper about it, but I was tired-" Will began, fumbling for excuses.

"So you just fell asleep in the hall?" the girl asked.

She was further away from the lantern light, so could not see her, but he could smell her rose and violet scent, omega notes coming toward him.

"It's complicated." Will muttered.

He could have easily concocted a lie that he had been sharing with Abigail and been kicked out by the young man she had, but even though these two had never met her before, he didn't want to tell them about Abigail's indiscretions. It was his job to protect Abigail. And Will wasn't sure he cared what either of these two thought of him, even as the man's eyes scraped him again. He put his arm around Winston.

One them or both, Winston did not like. Will took that as a warning. Being cornered by a strange alpha made Will uncomfortable- more than uncomfortable- but his look of concern seemed genuine despite his curiosity.

"No, no, no. No need to explain. I'm sure you have a good reason for sleeping here, but you shouldn't stay. My room is eleven, you can sleep there." the young man said, straightening and offering Will a hand.

Will couldn't tell if the alpha intended to stay in the room with him or not from this offer. Maybe he should risk Hannibal. Hannibal hadn't done anything to him while he was drugged, so why would he now?

"Mason, you're scaring him." the woman said.

"There's no need to be scared, omega." the man- Mason- said, smiling at Will.

Will accepted his offered hand and was pulled to his feet, Winston shoving himself between them.

"If I took your room, where would you sleep?" Will asked, tightening his grip on Winston's rope.

The last thing he needed was his new dog savaging a strange alpha who had clear influence.

"In my dear sister's room. It has two beds. She doesn't need them both." Mason said, glancing over his shoulder.

"Yes, I do." the woman said, voice flat.

"No, you don't." Mason said decisively. "Please, I insist. Papa would be rolling in his grave if I left an omega out shivering in the hall, and he wouldn't be wrong. It is a very rude thing to do."

His hand was still on Will's, holding it gently, but Will tugged it away.

"I'm Mason, as you already know, Mason Verger. This is my sister, Margot." the alpha said, nodding to the woman, who had ventured closer.

Her face was similar to her brother's, but she was prettier. Her brown hair was braided over her shoulder and her expression was neutral, but there was something in her eyes that Will felt like he should interpret. But he couldn't understand what she was trying to tell him.

"Uh, Will Graham. Nice to meet you." Will said, forcing himself to shake Mason's hand.

Mason captured his hand and brought it up his nose, sniffing at Will's wrist gland.

"You have an exquisite scent. Salt water and lemons. So ordinary, but it smells so lovely on you." he said and Will pulled his hand back at this forward behavior.

"So you want nothing in exchange for your room?" he asked, glancing subtly for an exit, but he had chosen a bad spot to fall asleep in.

Mason and Margot were hemming him in, and he would have to shove by Mason and drag a snarling dog with him at the same time.

"I saw you in the tavern earlier, but it looked as though you were with someone else?"

"Oh, uh, I-" Will hesitated.

He knew what Mason was asking. But he couldn't discern if it was for the purpose of the game, or something else. Actual, genuine interest in him. He was still unsure of the way Mason was looking at him, and Will had not noticed if anyone had ever been interested in him before. Maybe this was normal? He imagined that if Hannibal was in the hall with a pretty omega or girl, he would not claim Will as his fiancé.

"So, would that mean you'd be free to have dinner with me at nightfall?" Mason asked, smiling again.

Margot made a noise.

"Shut it, Margot." Mason said, sounding irritated. "Please ignore my dear twin. She has had too much to drink tonight. It makes her even more unlikeable than usual. I promise, if you

meet me for dinner, she won't be coming along."

He gave Will a smile, a smile that Will had, in his younger and more foolish years, hoped someone might smile at him, as if he wasn't just attracted to him, but he saw something beyond Will's looks that made him interested in him. But there was something candy-sweet about it, like those candies Will always found too sweet and unpleasant.

That's how I want the count to look at me. But I didn't... I thought it would look different. Will thought, and his stomach twisted with a bit of disappointment.

But even though he wasn't truly involved with Hannibal, he was still engaged, and behaving otherwise was dangerous.

"I'm sorry. I- can't. I-"

"It's all right." Mason said, smiling, but there was something sharper to it now, a falseness to it.

"I don't expect you to explain. Should have known such a pretty omega would be taken." Something glittered in his eyes.
For a tense moment, Will didn't think Mason was going to move and let him leave. He almost gave Winston the go-ahead. But he merely took Will's hand again and dropped an onyx key in it.

"Sleep well." he whispered, leaning close for a moment.

Winston body-checked him for that, as he had Hannibal, and Mason was knocked into the opposite wall. Will hauled Winston back and was about to drop the key, but Mason merely brushed himself off.

"You have a guardian. How nice. Please, take the room." Mason said and walked away, taking Margot with him. Winston only calmed when they faded.

Will waited and waited, but he didn't know what else do. Finally, he found the offered room, and unlocked the door. He sniffed the air, but there was little sign that Mason had ever been in here. He looked at Winston. Maybe he shouldn't have accepted, but he was exhausted, and his heart felt heavy, and he didn't want to be awake anymore. He suddenly didn't have the energy to make his way back to his own room and suck it up and sleep in the tub.

The room was dark, shades of ebony and onyx, and there was a mirror above the fireplace, and Will gasped as he saw his reflection. His evil enchanted clothes had transformed. The coat and scarf apparently disappeared and now he wore more form-fitting clothes, the sleeves short, the shirt clinging to his body. The pants were much the same, but of a softer, more alluring material. He had never shown that much skin aside from swimming before. No wonder Mason had been staring at him.

Irritated, Will locked the door, jammed a chair beneath the knob, and curled with Winston in the bed, falling instantly asleep.

Will did not sleep well. He dreamed.

He dreamed of Legend. He was back on the gilded balcony, wearing clothes he hated that exposed more skin than he ever would have liked, lewd clothes from romance novels submissive omegas wore. Tight, form-fitting, the pants feeling impossible to move in, the top more like a corset. He tried to wrap himself in the curtains, because something was wrong.

"What are you doing, little omega?" Legend asked as he swaggered in, wearing his signature top hot and having wayward intent burning in his eyes.

"I just wanted to watch." Will said, wrapping himself deeper in the curtains, but Legend pulled him away.

His hand was cold as ice, his youthful face swallowed in shadows. Frost nipped at Will's exposed skin, and suddenly Legend was slipping a mask on his face, binding his mouth, only holes allowing him to breathe. The straps dug into his head, the edge of the hard mask the bridge of his nose. Legend then pulled him close.

"I didn't invite you hear to watch, precious." he said, leaning close, as if he were going to try to kiss Will through the mask.

"I want you to play the game." he whispered.

Then he threw Will off the balcony.

Chapter End Notes

Ugh, Mason. I hate Mason. He got everything he deserved. I hope I wrote this slimy, creepy, son of a bitch right but if I didn't, oh well. Part of me doesn't care that much.

I know we never see Will's dogs getting too aggressive, even when serial killers broke into his house two separate times, but Winston's behavior is taken from personal experience with my own dogs, who would growl and put themselves between me and people they didn't know until I let them know it was okay.

Polite comments and questions are always welcome!

Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

Night One of Caraval

Chapter Notes

I got this done so much later than I meant to. I struggled a bit with it, and we can also, very slightly, blame my sister for agreeing to a Hannibal rewatch and getting me into a Hannibal/Bedelia state where I needed to write them.

I hope you enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Will woke up in a cold sweat. He was completely soaked, his hair drenched and sticking to his face. His breath came in short bursts.

He knew it had only been a dream, but for a single moment he wondered if Caraval's magic- *Legend's* magic- had somehow snuck into his dreams.

Or maybe it had been made of his thoughts? Twice so far he had been told that Caraval and everything that happened during it was only a game, yet he was behaving as if it were real. As if his every action would be discovered and judged and punished.

I didn't invite you here to watch, precious.

Will wasn't even doing that, though.

Yesterday, he had seen incredible things, but the entire time he had been controlled by fear. He had to remind himself that his father wasn't here. And if he was only going to stay for one night, he would certainly regret it later if he spent the entire time too frightened to actually enjoy it. Abigail would probably sleep for another hour at least, judging by the clock on the wall; he could have any hour to himself without having to worry about his sister. It wouldn't kill him to have some fun in the meantime.

His thoughts wandered to the alpha from last night, Mason. The way he had looked at Will, how Will had imagined the count looking at him. Despite his reservations and Winston's reaction, Will should have said yes to dinner with him. Dinner didn't mean anything. The alpha had given up his room selflessly for him; Will could have at least given him some

company. That would have been the proper thing to do. It would not have been as scandalous as being alone in the hall with him in the middle of the night.

His borrowed room had only one tiny octagonal window, but it was enough to see the sun lazily disappearing, and the canals and streets were returning to life. The world was on the cusp of nightfall. That hour of smoke and purple haze before night fully wrapped everything in its velvet embrace. Perhaps if he headed down to the Primavera Tavern, it would not be too late to catch Mason and take his invitation for dinner. Though he felt as though he should be eating breakfast. It was strange, how his body and mind had so quickly adjusted to the strange time on the island.

Getting up, Will took a quick shower to get the sweat off, noticing ideally that in the excitement of yesterday, he had gotten more scratched up than he had realized. He scrubbed out the scratches on his arms and hands and dragged on his magical clothes, which shifted again. Again, into something he was not entirely comfortable with, a mix of something he would have chosen for himself yet not entirely. Dark slacks, dark shirt, good leather boots, that jacket again with the scarf. He tugged at it, but it didn't change. It was bolder than he would have liked, drawing attention to him with the fabrics and style, fitted to him in ways he wasn't accustomed to.

He knew Abigail would love it, would have told him to stop hiding himself and have some fun. He would love to see her reaction.

He glanced at Winston, who was sitting placidly by the bathroom door, and he found what looked to be a clean ashtray. It smelled all right, so Will filled it with water and set it down for the dog. He drank from it eagerly and Will turned on the facet, scooping water into his mouth.

He had drank several handfuls when his stomach suddenly convulsed and he began to gag and cough, feeling as though he were about to throw up.

Bracing himself on the sink, Will felt something rise in his throat and he thought vaguely that he hadn't eaten since having that bit of cinnamon bread in the clock shop, he shouldn't have been throwing anything up-

He choked and gagged and bent over the sink, some large object lodging in his mouth as it came up. He hooked it out with his finger as he brought up the water he had just consumed, dislodging it into the sink.

He let out a cry of horror as he saw what it was.

Sitting in the sink was an ear.

A human ear. Severed neatly, it was lightly speckled with blood were it had been separated from the unfortunate owner and Will stared at it, dry heaving.

How... Why...

The world spun. Nothing made sense. He didn't understand. Maybe he was dreaming. Maybe he was hallucinating.

Winston was whining at him and Will looked back at the door, where the chair still sat neatly. No one had come in...

Not knowing what to think, he reached into his pocket and found a handkerchief, wrapping it around the ear. He didn't know what he was doing, his blood roaring in his ears, heart pounding in his chest, but suddenly he wanted to get away, and yet he could not leave it here.

He shoved it in his pocket and didn't even think to snatch Winston's rope, ripping the chair away from the door, rushing down the hall. The dog followed on his heels.

Hannibal. He had to find Hannibal. The alpha was the only person he knew here, the only person he could remotely turn to, except for- Abigail!

He had to find Abigail. He ran for room five and skidded to a halt outside it, because the door was cracked open. Green-hued light, like the gem-shaped doorknob, spilled out, seeping like fog.

Will knew immediately something was wrong. Something was very, very wrong. Winston stayed by his side as Will moved forward, reaching out, grasping the knob, heart pounding.

"Abby?" he said, pushing the door open.

"Abigail, it's me-" he began, breaking off as he saw what was on the other side of the door.

Abigail's room was a mess. Feathers covered the carnage, as if a swan had been plucked in the middle of the room while fighting for its life. They mixed with splinters of wood and shards of glass that snapped and crunched under Will's boots as he ventured in. Shreds of clothes from the ripped-open wardrobe decorated the room in gaudy stripes and splotches. The bed was damaged as well, the quilt ripped in half, pillows gutted, one of the posts removed like a crudely severed limb.

And splattered across it all was blood. Great gouts splattered the walls and the ceiling, in clear arterial spray, droplets and sprays staining the mess, tacky and dark, indicating that this had happened hours ago.

Will's heart pounded hard in his chest, the smell of blood enveloping him almost completely.

This... This was all Will's face. Abigail had been in a room with a man, but not for the reasons Will had assumed. He should have known. He should have gone in despite Abigail's protests. It was Will's job to protect his sister. Abigail was too reckless with men, especially alpha's. And Will had been foolish to think that they could stay here, even for a day. He should have left the island with Abigail the moment he had found her. If they had left right away, then this-

"What the in God's name!" a voice exclaimed and Will whirled, thinking for a moment it was his sister.

But the voice was unfamiliar.

"Hector, look- It's another clue." The woman who had just marched into the room was black-haired, slender, and coldly regal- definitely not Abigail. Her beta-scent was like perfume that made Will's lip want to curl.

"This is superb!" she continued, pulling an old man with spectacles after her.

"What are you doing?!" Will hissed, a growl edging his voice.

"This is my sister's room and someone hurt her- You can't be in here!" he continued, Winston pressing close to him.

The couple looked as though they had just noticed him, and they didn't seem to care at all about the blood that was splattered all across the room.

The woman smiled, but it wasn't a kind or pleasant smile. It was greedy, looking Will over intently.

"Is Abigail Hobbs your sister?"

"How do you know that?"

"When did you last see her? What does she look like?" the woman asked, moving toward him eagerly.

"What? My sister is hurt- she-" he began, but his jaw snapped shut.

The interrogation felt wrong and foul, like a sink clogged with dirty water. The women's eyes were too eager, too bright, her hands too clutching. And that was when Will saw the green glass key in her hand.

Exactly like the one Will had received, with the number of the room etched into it and a slip of paper with Abigail's name on it. Hannibal's words rushed back. His sister's name was his first clue. And other people had been given the exact same clue.

It's all a game. Will remembered the warning from the woman on the horse. This wasn't real. It was staged.

But it felt real. The dresses strewn about the room were really Abigail's. And when his sister had warned him away from the room, that had really been her voice, and she had genuinely sounded upset, although now Will realized it wasn't for the reason he had suspected.

And the blood all over everything smelled real, too. The ear Will had coughed up seemed real, too, and Will's stomach clenched as he thought of the earring he had not truly registered impaled in the ear. A little bird, given to her by their father. He reached into his pocket and slipped his finger into the handkerchief, feeling, feeling... Tracing the outline of the shrike.

He was distracted as feathers took flight, the woman and her companion digging through blood-spattered nightgowns and swiping a piece of costume jewelry from the floor.

"Hey! Don't touch those!" Will exclaimed.

"Sorry, dear, just because it's *your sister* doesn't mean you get all the clues."

"These aren't clues! They're my sister's things and this blood must hers. She's *hurt* and you don't care!" Will said, clenching his fists.

He raised his voice and growled, but all this did was draw more people, men, women, boys, girls- All swooped in like vultures and began to sift through the scene, snatching Abigail's things with greedy hands, shoving and pushing. No better than pigs rooting for acorns. Like vultures ripping meat off bones. Will wanted to grab them, hurt them, bite them, make them stop, but he didn't. He didn't because he felt powerless. How had he ever thought this game magical?

Some people, their scents overwhelming him, tried to ask him questions- as if he might lead them to another clue-but when Will wouldn't answer they hastily moved on.

He tried to grab what he could. Anything he could get, because no one would let him pick and choose. Scraps of dresses, ribbons, jewelry, picture cards- anything because these were his sister's things and the sight of other people grabbing them with eager, claw-like hands sent a rage he had never known burning in him. The fact that none of them blinked at the blood only added to it.

Abigail must have been serious about never returning to Wolf Trap, because it wasn't only her clothes strewn on the floor. Personal possessions, her favorite things, and some of Will's too. Will had no idea if these were things Abigail had taken selfishly or if she had taken them because she had no plans on letting Will return and knew he would want them.

"Excuse me."

A pregnant omega with a headful of fiery curls and cat-like eyes approached him, her raspberry and peony scent wrapping around Will, her voice soft.

"You look like you could use some help, and it's not like I can bend over very well." she said, motioning to her belly.

"Why don't we help each other out? I'll hold whatever you gather. Then we can sort out the clues together somewhere more quiet." she continued, offering a friendly smile.

Will was reaching the point where he couldn't pick up anymore, but he was reluctant to hand off Abigail's things to a stranger.

"It's not like I can run off. And even if I did, you'd catch me in a heartbeat." the girl said, laughing a little.

She was about Abigail's age and from the size of her, it looked like she could have her baby at any given second.

"I'm not sure-" Will began, breaking off as he saw a small, weaselly-looking man in a bowler hat pick up a piece of broken glass. Something gleamed underneath.

"HEY! You can't take that!" Will shouted, lunging toward the man.

The moment he saw Will's interest, the man's ignited into something more. He snatched up the watch and bolted for the door.

Will ran after him, losing Winston in the chaos of people, but the man was surprisingly quick and his arms were full. He was only halfway down the hall by the time the man had reached the stairs.

"I really will help you." the pregnant omega said, catching up to Will, panting hard. "I'll be right here when you get back."

Will still did not want to let go of what he had collected, but he couldn't afford to lose that watch. He dropped his things into the girl's arms and tried to catch up to the man, but he only caught a glimpse of his coat as he reached the staircase, disappearing from sight.

Out of breath, Will burst downstairs, seeing the door of Muskrat Inn swing shut as if someone had just run through. Will raced after to it, grabbing the door's edge. Outside, the world was nightfall and daybreak all at once. Stars winked like watching eyes, while hosts of lanterns set the streets ablaze with warm light. An accordion's jaunty notes bounced off buildings, and people moved to its music, swinging fine skirts and colorful jackets, but there were no bowler hats.

It shouldn't have mattered. It was just a watch. But it *did matter*. It was the only thing he had left.

His father had given it him right before he died, right before the sickness had claimed him. Will had managed to visit him, just once, and his father had taken the watch off his own wrist and pressed it into Will's hands. *Your father gave me this when we were courting*. he had said and Will had stared down at the plain watch, the leather band etched with waves. It had been a reminder than Hobbs had once been a different man, too.

It was difficult to picture his father like that sometimes. Though he had only changed fully after Louise had died, sometimes it felt like that man had never existed. After Johnathan had died and then again after Louise had, Hobbs had taken most of their possessions and either locked them away or destroyed them. Will only had the watch because he had hidden it, and Abigail only had a necklace, a crystal fawn, left of her mother. The seizing of his dad's things had been the first time Will had sworn to himself that he would never leave Abigail. Would never leave her with fading memories and pain and a trinket to remember him by.

Will was ashamed that his eyes burned with tears. It was only a watch. It wasn't like it was his father. This was all just a game. But it wasn't the game he had thought he was going to play.

Back in the crooked hallway, where Winston was patiently waiting, Will was not surprised to find that the pregnant girl had made off with all his things. Nothing remained of his sister's belongings. All he found was a glass button that probably belonged to someone else, because he had never seen them before.

"Those vultures." he snarled.

"I was not aware that you were the sort to curse." Hannibal said from where he leaned against the wall, watching casually, and Will had no idea how long he had been there.

"I curse. But *vultures* isn't a curse." Will said shortly.

"The way you said it made it sound as such."

"You would curse too if your sister had been kidnapped as part of this game."

"There you go, thinking far too highly of me, Mr. Graham. If I had a sister who had been kidnapped for the game, I would use it to my advantage. Stop feeling sorry for yourself and come." Hannibal said, pushing off the wall and walking into Abigail's ransacked room.

All the vultures were gone but everything of importance had been cleaned out. Even the doorknob had been taken.

"I tried to get what I could-" Will began, startled as his voice cracked.

For some reason, those greedy hands and eyes all over Abigail's things got to him, like they were pieces of a puzzle, not things that belonged to an actual person. And not one of them had cared for a moment about the blood.

He glanced at Hannibal, but there was no pity in his maroon gaze.

"It is just a game, Will. Those people were only playing. If you want to win, you will to be a little ruthless. Manners, at large, are not what Caraval is about."

"I don't believe you. I heard that the island takes whoever breaks the rules, that bad things happen to the rude. "

"Those who break the rules have it coming to them. The ones who have come close to winning, however, do set aside their manners, though they do serve their purposes at times. For some, the game is about fun. For others, they will collect everything they can and sell it to the highest bidder, regardless of whether or not the items are genuinely part of the game. Like the man who stole your watch."

"He won't get much money for it. It's nothing fancy. The only value it has is sentimental." Will said bitterly.

"You would be surprised." Hannibal said as he examined the room with a thorough eye.

"There are those who are willing to pay a handsome sum, or give up their deepest secrets, for just a tiny bit of the magic of Caraval. But those who don't play fairly often pay an even higher price. Legend has a sense of justice that way."

"Well, I don't want to play anymore. I just want to find my sister and go home." Will growled.

"That is a problem, then. If you want to find your sister before you leave, you will have to play the game, Will." Hannibal said, turning toward him.

"What are you talking about? She's hurt! We shouldn't just be standing here, deciding whether or not to play-"

"I feel that it is safe to assume that you did not look at the clue I gave you last night."

"All my clue had was Abigail's name."

"Are you certain of that?" Hannibal challenged.

"Of course. I just didn't think it was a clue, I thought Legend-" Will said, catching himself too late on his mistake.

Hannibal's lips curved into an amused smile and Will's face turned hot, his gaze fixing on Winston, who was nosing through the wreckage.

"We don't have time for this. There is blood in my sister's room. Great gouts of it. And none of those people cared. She could be hurt, she-"

"Will, check your clue, please." Hannibal said, sounding ever so slightly exasperated.

Will obeyed, if only to get him to focus. Below his sister's name was a wide swath of blank paper, but the only words that were on it were her name. Heart sinking as he remembered the letter and the tickets, Will took it over to the lantern, holding it up as Abigail had gone back on Wolf Trap. Sure enough, new words appeared in Legend's elegant script.

This girl was last seen with Legend

.

If you catch her, you shall catch him as well.

Of course, you will have to venture through Hell

.

But if you succeed, you may find yourself rich

.

This year's winner will be granted one wish

.

After a moment, the poem disappeared, and more words appeared.

This is your first clue on the road to find her

.

The others will not be so easy to retrieve

.

Some will question your sanity
And all that you believe

.

Clue number two you will discover at the scene of her departure

.

Number three you must earn

.

Number four will cost you something valuable

Number of five requires a leap of faith

.

Most of you will fail,
But one will surely succeed

.

You have five nights to find the
Four remaining clues and then the girl,
And Legend's wish will be yours

.

Will's dream must have been more than just a delusion: Legend had really wanted both him and Abigail here. He recalled what Peter had said on the balcony: *Once inside, you will be presented with a mystery that must be solved*.

Figuring out where Abigail had been taken must have been this year's mystery. That was why so many people had been in here; they had been looking for the clue, and Abigail herself. The note didn't say what would happen to Abigail if no one found her, nor did it explain the blood.

Chills prickled Will's spine. It was a game... But the blood was real. Abigail was gone.

"I... I found *this*." Will said numbly, reaching into his pocket.

Since they were alone, he pulled out the handkerchief and Hannibal delicately unwrapped it, staring at the ear sitting in Will's palm.

"It's Abigail's. The earring, our father gave it to her, so I know..." Will said, voice trembling.

Hannibal continued to stare, but he did not touch it.

"Where did you find it?" he asked.

Will was silent.

"Will, where did you find it?" he repeated.

"In... I threw it up." Will whispered, his hand shaking.

Hannibal's hand came up and cupped his hand from underneath, steadying it.

"All this blood and this ear isn't a *game*, Hannibal. Abigail is hurt. Seriously hurt! I don't know how her ear got in my stomach, because I was in a room I shouldn't have been in and I had Winston, and a chair in front of the door-" Will began, but Hannibal made a gentle shushing sound.

"Will, take a deep breath. Being calm is the best state you can be in right now." he ordered and Will almost snarled instead.

But he knew that would get him nowhere and he took a few deep breaths, trying to slow his racing heart.

"Our room had a secret door, did it not? It is possible that the room you borrowed did as well. You are Legend's special guest, after all, and you forget he has magic." Hannibal said in a reasonable voice that made Will want to bite him.

"*How* is this part of the game?!" he growled, looking into those strange eyes.

"Will, the game of Caraval revolves around a mystery each year. A crime scene is an enticing mystery, is it not? I suspect Legend intended for you to be shocked by the ear- which might not necessarily even be your sister's, despite the earring- and present it as a clue to everyone else. Perhaps you were not intended to bring it up as early as you did; it could be that you were meant to bring it up here, in front of the other players." Hannibal said, looking down at the ear again.

"That is fucked up." Will said, stomach churning.

"It may comfort you to know that it is likely fake. Magic, remember? Many things you see here are magic. And please do not look so distressed. If Abigail is currently with Legend, she is in no danger at all." Hannibal said and Will gaped at him.

"How?" he repeated.

"This blood is likely animal blood, for a flair of drama. The ear likely fake. Your sister is the piece that wins the game. Legend takes very good care of his special guests." Hannibal replied, smiling, and this should have reassured Will, but it did not.

The smile did not reach Hannibal's eyes, leaving them cold.

"How do you know that Legend takes good care of his guests? How can you be certain this is just a game, an act?" Will demanded.

"Look at the room that we were given because you were his *special guest*." Hannibal said, accent thickening slightly on the last two words. "I imagine your sister is somewhere just as nice, waiting like a damsel that must be rescued. As I have already said, the ear and the blood are enticing elements. There have been 'murder mystery' games in the past, and the victim has always turned up alive at the end. It would not due for the object of Legend's game to be injured or otherwise."

Again, the words should have soothed Will, but they did not. Abigail was not in any danger, and was helping with a dramatic story, having an adventure, just as she had always wanted. She was merely part of the game and probably loving every moment of it. But Will was still unsettled. Why would Legend decide to pick his sister to be the object of the game, of all people? Why Abigail?

"Are you jealous, Will?" Hannibal asked, lifting a brow.

"No!"

"It is understandable if you are. You are the one who wrote all those letters to Legend over the years. No one would blame you if were upset that he chose your sister instead of you."

"I am not jealous! I am concerned for my sister's safety!" Will snapped, but his fury only made amusement flicker across Hannibal's face.

Will bared his teeth and hissed, but that wasn't likely going to make Hannibal take him seriously.

Hannibal was probably right. It was all just a game. And if he wanted to find his sister, he would have to play this twisted mystery. He couldn't stay the one day he had planned. His wedding was in six days, on the twentieth. There were five nights of Caraval, but it would take two days to get back to Wolf Trap. To get Abigail back and return home in time to avoid their father's fury and marry the count, he would have to solve the mystery and win the game before the final night.

And if he wasn't the one to win the game, with Abigail's desire to leave Wolf Trap and never return, Will feared he would never see his sister again.

He took a deep breath. He noticed what others didn't. He loved stories like this, loved examining the evidence that was left in the story to solve the crime before the story revealed it. His dad and Abigail had remarked on his ability in the past. If anyone could do this, it was him.

He looked back at the hints. *Number two you'll discover in the rubble of her departure*. As Abigail's brother, Will should have the advantage here. If something in this room did not belong to Abigail, he would recognize it. But there were hardly any items left, aside from those so blood-covered they weren't worth anything. Hannibal had said the blood was part of the game. It was meant to entice... To distract.

"Go in the hall. Take Winston." Will said suddenly to Hannibal.

The alpha frowned at him, but obeyed, taking Winston's rope and exiting the room.

Will took a deep breath, stared the room, at the remains of the things here, thinking of the things he had seen before. He closed his eyes.

Fwwoosh.

Behind the dark landscape of his closed eyes, a fiery pendulum swung. As it did, Will saw the room as it had been before. He saw the blood disappear. He saw the wreckage right itself. He saw the room for what it had once been. His mind slotted the items he had seen into places where they likely would have been, where he knew Abigail most likely would have placed them. He went back in time until the room was as it must have been before he had arrived last night.

He looked around and examined Abigail's things, the personal belongings, the spill of dresses, all of it. He thought of what he had seen. Things he had recognized. Things he hated people had touched. And then...

And then he turned to his sister, who was standing behind him. Was she alone? Was he the one she had been in the room with last night? It did not matter. Judging by the blood spray, he had was the one who had been here.

He grabbed her and in his hand he held some device, because this had to look good. It sprayed blood as as if he were cutting with a knife and he held Abigail to himself, her scent and warmth soaking into him. He heard a voice on the other side of the door, concerned, a scent coming with it. Abigail called out, preventing the intruder from coming, and soon they finished. They wrecked carnage as they sprayed the blood, making it look good.

"One last thing." he whispered to Abigail and raised the knife to her ear.

He sliced and blood sprayed, Abigail gasping, and he wrapped the severed ear in a handkerchief, grasping Abigail's hand, soothing her pain, and as they made to depart, he spotted something.

"You don't belong." he said, staring down at an object the size of a playing card sitting in front of the dresser.

He opened his eyes, finding himself in front of the dresser, and he bent, scooping up the blood-stained object.

"Will? Have you found something?" Hannibal called softly from the hall.

"I thought we were a team, Will." he added when Will did not reply.

"Being teammates has almost solely benefitted you, not me."

"I would not say 'almost solely'. If you forget, you would not be here if it were not for my actions."

"I could claim the same. Last night, I saved you and got you into the game, and you took the room for yourself!"

"You could have slept in the bed as well, as I told you." Hannibal said patiently.

Will hissed again. "You know that was never an option."

"All right." Hannibal said, holding his hands up in a placating gesture.

"We shall have a more even partnership from here on out. I will continue to share my knowledge of the game. We will both share whatever clues we may find. And we will trade days with the room. Tonight, you will sleep in the room. I will sleep in it tomorrow, and so forth. When you are sleeping in the room, I promise I will not. When I am sleeping in it, you are welcome to share if you wish, with the deal I proposed."

"Bastard." Will muttered.

"I have been called much worse. Now, will you be so kind as to show me what is in your hands?" Hannibal said, not missing a beat.

Will looked out toward the hall and sniffed deeply, checking that no one was lingering, that no one would overhear. He drew closer to Hannibal. Then he turned the picture card in his hand for Hannibal to see.

"This does not belong to my sister."

Chapter End Notes

I actually didn't get around the mentioning, but the woman who was poking around in Abigail's room was Mrs. Komeda, if that wasn't clear, and I made up Mr. Komeda to go with her. And I think we all know who the pregnant omega was.

Comments and kudos are always welcomed!

Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

Night One of Caraval

Chapter Notes

Well, here we go! I'll try to pick up the writing pace, because I really enjoy writing this, but again, I took the time to write another story. Probably will do it again before this one is done. The new one will be posted after La Sposa del Mostro is finished being posted.

Thanks for all the comments and kudos!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Will had been eleven, he had been wildly obsessed with castles. It didn't matter if they were made of stone or glass or the wild conjurings of imagination. They were fortresses, and Will had imagined if he had lived in one, he would have been protected from all the horrors of the world. The harm that had come to his family. The harm his father had brought him and Abigail, and all his victims.

Abigail had never had such romantic notions. She had not wanted to be locked away from the world. She had wanted adventure, to travel, to get away from Wolf Trap and see the world. And what better what to do that than with a pair of beautiful, feathered wings?

Abigail had never told Will, but she had longed to fly, like an angel, like a bird trapped in a cage set free.

Will had not meant to, but he had laughed when he had his sister's hidden cache of picture cards. All of them with glittering pictures of winged humans, angels and otherwise, including men without much in the way of clothes.

For a few years after that, whenever they had had a major fight, whenever Abigail had teased Will about his castles- but never the rivers and forests he had come to covet- Will had been tempted to taunt her with her wish to fly. At castles, forests, and rivers were real. Even when his mind had been filled with wild dreams of Caraval, impressionable Will had known that it was impossible to fly. But he had never said a word. Not when Abigail had teased him about his forts (it was always castles, never pretty, impractical palaces), or his growing fixation with Caraval. Because Abigail's fantasies had given Will hope- that despite the death of his

dad, the death of her mother, their father's violence, his sister was still capable of dreaming, had no need to build forts in her mind, and he couldn't ever destroy that.

"Abigail's picture cards are always of a very particular theme." Will explained to Hannibal. "She wouldn't have one with a castle on it."

"I believe that is in fact a palace." Hannibal said, peering at it critically.

"The distinction doesn't matter. She still wouldn't have this. It must be the next clue."

"You're positive?" Hannibal asked.

"If you don't trust my knowledge on my own sister, then you can find someone else to play the game with." Will flashed, baring his teeth ever so slightly.

"Believe it or not, Mr. Graham, I like working with you. And I believe I remember seeing that palace after we caught the boat last night. If you are correct and the palace is the second clue, then it is where we will find the third. When I played before-" Hannibal began, quieting as bootsteps sounded in the hall.

Loud. Confident. They stopped just outside the door of Abigail's door.

Will peered into the hall as Winston growled, hastily snatching the rope.

"Why, hello there." Mason said, greeting him with the same candy-sweet smile.

He was dressed in dark colors tonight, inky blues hovering close to black, the dark shades punctured by a bright red tie, and he seemed to brighten when at the sight of Will. Margot hovered behind him, dressed darkly as well, and Will noticed that her arm was in a crude sling made from a scarf, her makeup bold yet subdued.

"I was just about to check on you, omega. Did you sleep well in my room last night?"

The way Mason said it, the words *sleep* and *my room* sounded far more scandalous than Will was comfortable with.

"Who is at the door, *mylimasis*?" Hannibal asked, moving behind Will, glancing down at Winston for a moment.

He did not touch Will in the slightest- their clothes did not even brush- but the way he slid close was just a proprietary. Will could feel the coolness of the alpha's body as he placed one hand on the frame and the other on the door behind him.

Mason's smile immediately vanished. His eyes darted from Will to Hannibal. He didn't say a word, but Will could clearly read the hardening of his features, the spark in his watery eyes behind his glasses. There was certainly something dangerous in this alpha. And he sensed something shift in Hannibal as well.

Hannibal's chest brushed against Will's back, and when it did, every muscle was hard and coiled, like a predator preparing to pounce, at odds with careless tone.

"Isn't someone going to introduce me?"

"Hannibal, this is Mason." Will said.

Mason stuck out a hand. Will caught the flash of something silver in his sleeve.

"He was kind enough to give up his room for me, considering the mix-up with mine." Will explained.

"Then it is very good to meet you." Hannibal said, his scent also calm despite the tension in his body.

"I am so glad that you were able to assist my fiancé. When I heard of what had happened, I felt sick with worry. I wish he had come to me so you wouldn't have been inconvenienced, but I thank you for helping him."

Hannibal turned to Will, all false affections and infuriating looks.

He had been wrong about him being disturbed, being predator-tense. He was enjoying this, playing the part of concerned fiancé, just to scare off Mason, when he really couldn't have cared less.

Will looked back at Mason, hoping to find a good way to explain that he hadn't actually lied. But he no longer looked disturbed, and his face had shifted, shifted beyond that, to a sort of false indifference, and Will was suddenly glad for Hannibal's ruse as the other alpha looked at him. He looked at Will like he was prey.

"And his sister, Margot." Will said very belatedly, looking at where the other omega was lurking.

Hannibal's eyes landed on her and she waved with her good arm, but there was something in her eyes again. Hannibal did not give Will the time to decipher it, and Winston was still growling deeply.

"Come, *mylimasis*. We should move aside so they can look as well." Hannibal whispered.

"That's all right." Mason said, tone stiff and bitter. "I think I've seen all that I need to see. Come on, Margot."

With this, he turned and walked down the hall, Will smelling the irritation in his scent, Margot throwing a backwards glance at him.

As soon as they were out of earshot and sight, Will whirled on Hannibal.

"I am not your property, and I don't appreciate you acting like it!" he snapped, twisting the end of the rope in his hd.

"But you enjoyed the way Mason was looking at you?" Hannibal inquired, tone subtly mocking.

"Do you suppose he practices his charms in the mirror?"

"Stop it. No matter what his intentions are, he was nice to me. It doesn't hurt to try to be the same." Will said, not wanting to admit how uncomfortable Mason made him.

There was just something... Off about the alpha, and Will couldn't tell if it was his isolation, fear, or if he had real reason to worry. He had been worried about Hannibal, but the alpha kept surprising him.

"He looked as though he were willing to collect a debt from that action."

"Not everyone is like you." Will growled, saying that mostly to be mean.

He marched out of the room, Winston trotting alongside him, clutching the bloody picture card, the second clue, in his hand.

"Will, I am trying to warn you. Mason Verger is not a good man. You should stay away from him." Hannibal said, striding after him.

Will stopped at the top of the stairs and drew his shoulders back, clearly recalling the hungry look on his face when he and Abigail had been in the barrel room. All Alphas were wolves. He wasn't sure why he had expected Hannibal to prove to be any different, and Mason was probably as much a wolf as he was. He could only hope the count was one of the rare few who weren't.

"As if you are any better."

"I am not saying I am a good man. But I do not desire any of the things from you that bastard does. If I did, I would advise you to stay away from me as well. Mason won Caraval the last time I played. Remember when I mentioned the game costs you something? Even winning it comes with a price, and his triumph cost him greatly. I wager he will do anything to win the wish and try to get back everything he lost. Ponder the fact his sister is injured before the game even began. If you believe my moral compass is damaged, then I will tell you his does not exist." Hannibal said and there was something in his eyes that made Will pause.

He saw Hannibal's hand drift, muscles tensing... Right where the brand on his back was. Suspicion nagged at Will, but it was possible that it was a tic, like his own habit of chewing his bottom lip was.

Hannibal stared him down and then slid past him, heading down the stairs, leaving Will to hurry after.

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"Why, if it isn't the happy couple!" The pretty woman from the gates waved at them as Will, Hannibal, and Winston approached the boat she was manning.

The last thing Will wanted to do was pretend to be Hannibal's blissful bride-to-be, but he managed to add some energy to his voice.

"Weren't you on the horse last night?"

"I do a lot of things. All Caraval performers do." the woman said proudly.

Will remembered Hannibal's warning about her, but as the woman began to row, it was hard to think that she was anything but genuine. She was much friendlier than the girl from the night before, and her scent had notes in it that, despite belonging to an alpha, soothed Will.

Maybe Hannibal just didn't like anyone who seemed pleasant or nice.

Although, now he was quite amiable to the woman; after flashing her the picture card, he inquired about her name.

"My name is Alana." the woman said, smiling pleasantly at him.

As she rowed, Hannibal asked more questions and laughed at her jokes. Will was impressed by how polite he could be when he wanted to, though he imagined that was merely to get information. He was flirting just a little, but not enough to get a warning out of his 'fiancé'. If he did, Will would pay him back and give him an earful.

Alana pointed out all sorts of sights as they talked. The canals were circular, like a long apple peel spread around curving lantern-lined streets, full of pubs piping russet smoke, bakeries shaped like their products, and shops wrapped in colors like birthday presents. Cerulean blue. Apricot orange. Saffron yellow. Primrose pink. Poppy red. Colors Will didn't know the exact shade of.

While the canals remained dark at midnight, glass lanterns lined the edges of each building, emphasizing the brilliant colors as people bustled around. Will thought it looked like some sort of intricate dance being performed to the various pieces of music being played. Harps, bagpipes, cellos, violins, flutes, and more. Each canal had a heartbeat that resonated a different instrument.

"There is a lot to see." Alana said as they passed. "If you are willing to pay and look hard enough, you'll find things on the isle you won't come across anywhere else- some people come here just to search through the shops and never try to play the game.

She continued to speak, but her words were lost on Will as he spied what seemed to be a commotion on the corner of one street. A woman was being dragged out of a shop, forcibly. Will heard a shrill cry; then a cluster of people blocked his view, pulling at the woman, a seething mass of thrashing arms and kicking legs.

"What's happening over there?" Will said, pointing.

But by the time Alana and then Hannibal looked, someone had snuffed out all the nearby lanterns, concealing everything behind a curtain of night.

"What did you see?" Hannibal asked.

"A woman in a gray dress, and she was being dragged out a shop."

"That was probably just a street show. Sometimes performers do that to add drama for those who are only observing- she probably made it seem as if she had stolen something or was going mad. You'll see more of that as the game progresses." Alana said dismissively.

Will almost whispered to Hannibal that it had seemed very real to him, but hadn't he been warned about that when they had first entered the game?

Alana swept her arm out with a flourish when she stopped rowing. "Now here we are. The palace on the card. Otherwise known as the Palazzo degli Uffizi."

For a moment Will forgot all about the mad woman. The palace was unlike anything he had ever seen before. Lines of glittering white sand, almost like snow, stretched up to a palace shaped from white marble and glass. It had a familiar style, fused with a completely fairy tale appearance. Connecting to the main building were domes, elegant arches, and even bridges, crafted from glass that caught the light of the stars like sheets of crystal and marble that glittered with hidden flecks. Rather than being lit by candles or lanterns, the structure itself seemed to give off its own light. It filled itself up, making it brighter than everything else, as if they had found a place in the world where the sun had shed tears of pure light.

"What do we owe you for the ride?" Hannibal asked.

"For you two, there is no charge." Alana said, making Will realize this was probably why Hannibal had been so kind to her.

"You will need everything you have in there. Time moves even faster inside the Palazzo."

Alana nodded to two massive hourglasses flanking the Palazzo's entrance, each more than two stories high and filled with shifting beads that looked like crystalized drops of blood. Only a tiny fraction of beads were at the bottom.

"In case you haven't noticed, days and nights on this isle are shorter. Certain types of magic are fueled by time, and this place uses quite a bit of magic, so make sure to use your minutes wisely once you enter."

Hannibal helped Will, who was clutching Winston again, out of the boat. As they crossed over the arched bridge and past the massive hourglasses, Will wondered how many minutes of their lives would take the form of one bead. A second in Caraval seemed richer than any second spent in the real world, like that moment on the cusp of sunrise or sunset, when all the colors in the sky became magic.

"We should look for the type of place your sister would be attracted to. I believe that is where we would find the third clue." Hannibal said.

Will thought of the note that had been tied to his key: *Number three you must earn*. He didn't think Hannibal was quite right in his assessment, but it was a good place to start.

Beyond the hourglasses, a path on their right led up to many terraces, which formed a good portion of the Palazzo. From below they reminded Will of libraries for some reason, filled with the kind of old books people weren't supposed to touch.

The path ahead of them lead to a massive courtyard, an explosion of color, people, scents, and sounds. A great tree grew in the center of it, teeming with tiny birds made of wonder. Winged stags and avian kittens, miniature flying tigers wrestling with palm-sized elephants who used their leaf-like ears to stay aloft. A motley collection of tents and gazebos filled the courtyard, music spilling out of some, while laughter spun out of others, like the jade-green tent selling kisses.

There was no question to which one Abigail would have been immediately drawn to, and if Hanibal had asked, Will would have confessed that he felt entranced by what he saw in the tented courtyard. He shouldn't have been tempted.

He should only be thinking of Abigail. Of the severed ear in his pocket. Of looking for the next clue so he could find his sister, make sure she was all right, and get home. But he watched the jade kissing tent, hearing the hushed giggles and whispers and the promise of butterflies, he did wonder...

Will had been kissed. At the time he had told himself it was nice, and he had been content with it, but now nice seemed like a word people said when they had nothing better to say. Will doubted his nice kiss would compare to a kiss during Caraval, especially with all the games and magic that seemed to be involved here. In a place where even the air tasted sweet, he momentarily wondered what flavor someone else's lips pressed to his would have.

"Does it strike your fancy?" Hannibal asked, drawing his words out in a low, raspy voice, bringing a flush to Will's face immediately.

"I was looking next door." Will said, pointing hastily to the tent beside it, the unfortunate color of plums.

Hannibal smiled a little wider. Obviously, he didn't believe him. His smile broadened as Will's cheeks turned redder.

"There is no need to be embarrassed. Although if you need some practice before your wedding, as you mentioned in the barrel room, I am more than willing to help for free and allow you to keep your currency."

Will tried to make a sound of disgust, but it came out more like a whimper.

"Was that a yes?" Hannibal asked, tipping his head.

Will gave him a foul look, meant to serve as a no. But apparently it only put him in a better mood.

"Have you seen your fiancé? His appearance could be quite unfortunate." Will asked.

"His appearance doesn't matter. He sends me letters every week, and they are kind, thoughtful-"

"In other words, he is a liar." Hannibal cut in.

"You don't even know what the letters say." Will said, scowling.

"I know he is a count." Hannibal said, beginning to tick things off on his fingers.

"That means he is a noble, and no one holds a position like that and manages to stay honest unless their family is very, very old indeed, and therefore little effort is needed to accumulate that wealth. If he is looking for an island mate, it is likely because his family is inbred, which also means he is unattractive, and it means the children he gives you could have any host of genetic issues. It also means he will likely breed you frequently in hopes of having a pool of healthy heirs that might make it to adulthood."

Hannibal's tone was serious as one of his fingers came to rest beneath the bottom of Will's chin, tilting his face towards his own, and Will's heart clenched to hear Hannibal so blatantly expressing some of his most private fears about his fiancé.

"Are you sure you do not wish to rethink my offer and consider that kiss?"
Will pulled away with a grunt of revulsion, but it was a little too loud, a little too forced, a little too wrong. And to his horror, rather than feeling distaste, a tingle of curiosity went through him.

They were closer to the kissing tent now. Perfume wafted from it. It smelled like the middle of the night, reminding Will that under the cover of night, people were different. Perhaps even truer to themselves. It made him think of soft lips traveling across his skin, strong hands holding him, stubble brushing against his cheek in a way that made him think far too much about Hannibal.

Ignoring the way his pulse began to pick up, he tried to think of a quip, a retort, anything clever to Hannibal's next jab. But, for once, the alpha remained quiet. In a way his sudden silence was more uncomfortable, and spoke more volumes, than the if he had teased Will again.

He could not imagine his response to his offer had offended the sailor, although he noted that he didn't walk as close as before, even though Winston had not checked him this time. Even when Hannibal made no effort to touch him, he was usually close enough that he easily could, but they made their way through the courtyard, a little too quiet and a little too far apart, not the picture of a blissful engaged couple.

"Do you wish to know your future?" a woman's voice interrupted.

"Oh, uh-" Will stammered as he turned, greeted by a wall of flesh.

Well, not quite. He had never looked at a naked man or woman (his sister when they had been little or anything else did not count, along with their parents) before. And while the woman that he had turned to see was not quite as naked as he had originally thought, he knew it would be improper to even consider entering her inky blue tent. Yet Will didn't back away.

Her scent was alpha, lily root and vetiver, and that was the first hint at improperness. And all she wore was a diaphanous 'dress', if you could call it that. It was silk so fine and thin that the light of the Palazzo teased through it, covering her most private areas yet offering definite glimpses of the skin bellow. As dark as her tent, the silk slipped over her shoulders in thin straps, covering her breasts, the separate sections joining together at her hips to cover her

most private areas before falling to the ground, slits doing little to hide her legs. Her ethereal blonde hair tumbled in curls around her face and shoulders. She was shorter than both Will and Hannibal, far shorter, but she was striking.

And this was because she was completely covered in paint. A great dragon chased a woman clothed in gold across a forest on her abdomen. Angels shot arrows from places on her ribs. Some peared lambs and fawns, others struck a creation that was a fusion of man and tree who bleed brilliant flower petals. The petals spilled down the tops of her slim legs, one of which was covered in a detailed circus scene, the other covered in what appeared to be the stories of the rings of hell. One arm showed a great stag with its bloody antlers lowered to a girl, another showed a great tiger, and more intricate, smaller details.

Her face was equally decorated, though the paint hid none of her loveliness. An eye peered from her cheek, the iris purple; her actual eyes were lined with black stars. The other cheek bore a fluttering bird. But it was her lips that held Will's attention. Painted with dark barbed wire with blood on the tips of the prongs, one side was secured with a padlock formed of a clock, the other sealed with a bleeding heart.

"How much do you charge for a reading?" Hannibal asked.

If he was surprised or entranced by the woman's unique appearance, he didn't show it.

"I will uncover your future in proportion to what you give me." the painted woman replied.

"That's all right. I think I'm fine with discovering my future as it comes." Will said hurriedly.

"That is not how it seemed yesterday when we passed by those ridiculous spectacles."

"What spectacles?"

"The different-colored ones that allowed you to see the future."

Will did remember now: he had been intrigued, but he was surprised Hannibal had even noticed.

"If you would like to go in, I can keep searching for clues." Hannibal offered, pressing a hand to the small of Will's back and giving him a gentle shove.

He was about to argue; putting on spectacles was not the same as entering a darkened tent with a half-naked alpha woman. But yesterday he had lost Abigail because he had been too unsure of striking a bargain. If a third clue needed to be earned, maybe earning it meant taking risks- and he might be able to get information about where he could find his sister.

"Do you want to go with me?" Will asked.

"I would rather have my future remain a surprise." Hannibal said, cocking his head toward the kissing tent.

"When you are done, I will meet you over there." He blew Will a taunting kiss, which made him think that maybe all the earlier awkwardness had been in his head.

"I am not sure I would agree with that." he painted woman said.

Will could have sworn he had not spoken out loud; surely this woman couldn't read his mind. Or maybe she had only guessed that the statement could easily apply to whatever it was Will had been thinking, another way to trick him into entering her darkened tent.

Chapter End Notes

Let's play the' how many references and symbols can I fit on Bedelia?' game! In the book, the guy was tattooed, but I just couldn't see Bedelia getting a bunch of tattoos, so she gets paint.

I did my best to combine the Uffizi Gallery appearance with a fairy tale one, so I imagine it looks pretty weird now. :) Originally it was going to be the chapel, but I have other plans for that.

And ugh, Mason again. Unfortunately, we'll being seeing more of him. As you notice, he's now listed as a character.

Also, Hannibal probably now needs to go take a chunk out of himself with his behavior and the whole 'eat the rude' motto of his.

Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

Night One of Caraval

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The woman, close Hannibal in age upon further inspection, told Will that her name was Bedelia as she lead him past the sleek walls of her tent and into an area of sand wreathed in candle smoke and the scent of jasmine incense.

"Sit." she instructed.

"I'd rather stand." Will said, coiling Winston's rope around his hand.

The sea of pillows made him think too much of his room in Muskrat Inn. For a moment he flashed back to Hannibal lounging in his unbuttoned shirt.

When he looked back at the cushions, Bedelia had positioned herself in an elegant, if not somewhat... Tempting position, her dress hiding enough to preserve her modesty, but her body seeming more like a display now. Will's cheeks burned and her alpha scent caught in the back of his throat, those that combined with her position making him want to run back up the stairs.

"Where's your crystal ball? Or tarot cards?" Will asked as Winston sniffed around enthusiastically.

The corner of Bedelia's painted lips twitched, not into a friendly shape, and Will edged back toward the stairs.

"You have a lot of fear."

"No, I'm cautious. I want to know how this works." Will countered.

"Because you are afraid." Bedelia repeated, looking at him in a way that made Will think she meant something other than his reluctance to enter her tent.

"Your eyes keep finding the lock on my lips. You feel trapped and unsafe. And your eyes land here as well. You want love and protection." Bedelia said, pointing first at the clock lock, then the dripping heart.

"Isn't that what every omega wants?" Will said, though he knew very well that it wasn't.

"I can not speak for every omega, but most eyes are drawn to other things. Many want power." Bedelia said, drawing a finger, painted with a knife, over the dragon.

"Others desire pleasure." Here she drew her finger over the circus on her leg, long with a few other paintings.

"Your eyes passed over all of these immediately."

"So this is how you tell the future? You see how people stare at you and what paintings catch their attention?" Will asked, meaning to mock, but he was too intrigued.
Instead, he stepped closer.

"I think of them as mirrors. The future is much like the past; it is mostly set, but it can always be altered-"

"I thought it was the opposite. The past is set but the future is changeable?" Will interrupted, brows knitting.

"No. The past is only mostly set, and the future is harder to change than you would believe."

"So, you're saying everything is already decided? That fate exists?" Will said, wrinkling his nose.

He was not fond of fate. He liked to believe that if he were good, good things would happen. The thought of fate gave him a sense that he was powerless, and hopeless, and with an overall feeling of lessness. To him, fate seemed like a larger, omnipotent version of his father, stealing his choices and controlling every aspect of his life without any regard for his feelings or wishes. Fate meant that nothing anyone did ever truly mattered.

"You are far too quick to dive into fear. What you think of as fate only applies to the past. Our futures are only predictable because as creatures of this world we are predictable. Think of a cat and a mouse." Bedelia said, twisting her arm to reveal a tawny cat stretching its claws toward a black-and-white striped mouse on the underside.

"When a cat sees a mouse, it will always chase, unless, perhaps, it is pursued by something else, such as a dog. We are much the same. The future knows what things we desire, unless there is something greater in our path that chases it away." Bedelia moved her fingers to trace the midnight-top hat painted on her wrist gland and Will watched, mesmerized.

It looked exactly like the one Legend had worn in his dream, making him recall the time when all he wanted from him was a letter.

"But even those things that might change our course, the future usually sees clearly. It is not fate, it is simply the future observing what we crave the most. Every person has the power to change their fate if they are brave enough to for what they desire more than anything."
Will tore his eyes away from the hat and caught Bedelia smiling at him once more.

"Are you intrigued by that hat?"

"I wasn't looking at that. I was looking at the other images on your arm." Will lied, feeling embarrassed.

He should have been thinking of Abigail, not Legend. The ear suddenly felt like a stone in his pocket.

Bedelia clearly didn't believe him. She smirked at him, stretching the wire on her lips.

"Are you prepared for me to tell you what I see in your future?"

Will shifted his weight, watching as more smoke wove around his feet. The lines of the game were beginning to blur again. Bedelia made far more sense than he wanted her to. As he looked at the dragon on her abdomen, he thought of his father- destructive in his desire for power, for control. The wild circus on her leg made him think of Abigail, but so did the little fawn fleeing from it, leaping toward the forest above- her need for pleasure to help her forget the wounds she pretended did not exist, and what she actually was. The bloody stag made him think of Hannibal- odd, out of place, but deadly and elegant. And Bedelia had been exactly right about the lock and the heart.

"What will it cost me?"

"Just a few answers." Bedelia assured him, flipping her hand over to reveal an anatomically correct heart on her palm.

"I will ask you questions, and for each one you answer truthfully, I will give you an answer in return."

The way she said it made it seem so simple.

Just a few answers.

Not his firstborn child.

Not a piece of his soul.

So simple.

Too simple.

But Will knew nothing was ever simple, especially not in a den such as this, a place designed to seduce and trap.

"I will start with something easy. Tell me about your companion, the handsome young man you traveled here with. I'm curious, how do you feel about him?" Bedelia asked in a languid tone.

Will's eyes flicked immediately to Bedelia's lips. To the barbed wire painted around them. Not the heart. Not the heart. His feelings for Hannibal were not like that.

"Hannibal is selfish, dishonest, and opportunistic. I can see something in his eyes that I'm wary of."

"Yet you've agreed to play the game with him. Those must not be your only feelings." Bedelia said, pausing.

She had seen him look at the heart. Why it mattered, Will didn't know, but he could tell that it did. He heard it in the way she asked, "Do you find him attractive?"

Will wanted to deny it. Hannibal was the barbed wire. Not the heart. But while he had not always liked Hannibal as a person so far, he couldn't honestly deny that he was extremely appealing physically. His sharp features, his ash brown hair, his strange eyes. And even though Will would never tell Hannibal, he loved the way the alpha moved, with that predator grace and confidence, as though nothing in the world could harm him. It made him feel safe, less fearful, like even if something bad happened, he wouldn't be alone when it did. As if boldness and bravery did not always end in defeat.

But he didn't want to tell Bedelia that, either. What if Hannibal were eavesdropping?

"I-" Will tried to lie, but the words stuck in his throat like he had swallowed a glob of molasses.

"Are you having a problem?" Bedelia asked, waving a hand over a cone of incense. "Here. This helps loosen tongues."

Or forces people to tell the truth. Will thought.

When he opened his mouth again, the words poured out.

"I think he's the most attractive person I've ever seen."

He wanted to grab the words and shove them back in his mouth, mortified.

"I also think he is entirely full of himself." he managed to add, just in case the scoundrel *was* listening.

Winston rolled happily in the sand, appearing to be giddy on the incense.

"Interesting. Now, what two questions would you like to ask me?" Bedelia asked, tilting her head.

"What? Don't you have any other questions to ask me?" Will asked, alarmed that she had only wanted to know about Hannibal.

"We're running out of time. The hours slip by like minutes here."

Bedelia's hands drifted toward the dying candles lining her den.

"You have two questions."

"Just two?"

"Do you wish for that to be one of your questions?"

"No. I just-" Will said, snapping his mouth shut before he accidentally said something he shouldn't.

If it really was a game, it didn't matter what he asked. Whatever answers he discovered here would be make-believe. But what if parts of it were real? For a moment Will dared to let his thoughts tiptoe to that dangerous place. He had already had more than enough proof that magic was real. Matthew's clock shop door, the enchanted clothes, other little things here and there. And Bedelia's incense had made him speak the truth, despite not wanting to. It was all evidence that magic was, in fact, real. He trusted the evidence he had seen for himself, even if this was all just a game. And if the woman before him could really tell the future, what did he want to know?

His eyes flicked to the bleeding heart on the corner of Bedelia's mouth. Red. The color of love and heartache and injury and other things both virtuous and vile. As he looked at it, he thought of the count, of Abigail's words, of Hannibal's words, of the lovely letters and whether or not if they were actually true. His fear that he may be giving himself to a person just as bad or worse than his father.

"The man I'm supposed to marry, can you tell me what sort of person he is- is he a good, honest person?"

As soon as the words left his mouth, Will regretted not asking about Abigail first. He should have only been thinking of Abigail- it was why he had come into the tent in the first place. But it was too late to take the words back, and the ear seemed to grow a little heavier in his pocket. What if she truly was hurt, if Hannibal's reassurances turned out to be false?

"No one is truly honest." Bedelia said, breaking through his thoughts.

"Even if we don't lie to others, we other lie to ourselves. And the word good means different things to different people."

She learned forward, close enough that Will felt as if all the scenes on her body were watching him, catching glimpses of others he hadn't noticed before. Bedelia stared so intently at him he wondered if there were images on his own face that only the alpha could see.

"I am sorry, but the man you will marry is not what you would define as good. At one time, perhaps, but he has turned from that path, and it is not yet clear if he can make it back."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean? How can it not be clear? You just said the future was mostly set- that we're like cats, always chasing the mouse unless something chases us away."

"Yes, but every so often, there are two mice. It is not yet clear which one he will continue to chase, or if something else will catch him. You would be wise to be careful." Again, Bedelia looked at him as if he were covered in pictures only she could see. Pictures that pulled her

lips into a frown, distorting the wire, as if Will also had a heart near his mouth, but instead of bleeding it had been ripped to shreds.

Will tried to tell himself it was all in his head. He was attempting to trick him. To frighten him and throw him off balance as part of th game. But his marriage to the count was in no way connected to the game. There was nothing to be gained by a false, cryptic warning.

Bedelia rose from her cushions and started toward the back of the tent.

"Hey, I never asked my second question." Will protested.

"Actually, you asked me three questions. I was feeling generous when I answered the third."

"But two of them weren't real questions- I was just thinking out loud. That doesn't count. You owe me another question." Will said, wishing he had kept his mouth shut.

It seemed that the incense truly had loosened his tongue.

Bedelia looked back at Will, wreathed in smoke, a slender display of motley images, topped by a vicious smile that showed her larger alpha fangs.

"I don't owe you anything."

Chapter End Notes

Bedelia really seemed to fit this role, even if I had to change her appearance to very un-Bedelia. I wanted to have her ask the wounded bird question, but I couldn't figure out how to work it in, and I think in this setting it would freak Will out more than anything. : (

Polite questions and comments are always welcomed!

Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

Night One of Caraval

Chapter Notes

Yeah, this took me a little bit! I had a few other fics I was busy with, but I am doing my best to stop my WIPs from breeding and making new ones. Please enjoy this chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Wait!" Will chased after her. "I'm not asking for a glimpse into the future. My sister was taken as part of the game; all I want to know is where I can find her. I keep feeling like she's in danger."

Bedelia turned around, a flash of paint and color.

"If you truly care about your sister, why didn't you ask about her first?"

"I don't know." Will said.

But that wasn't quite true. He had made a mistake yet again, just like in the clock shop. He had been wondering about his own future more than he cared about finding Abigail. But maybe he could fix that mistake. Bedelia has said she would uncover more of his future in proportion to what he gave her.

"Wait." Will repeated as Bedelia started walking again.

"It was the heart." he blurted, and the alpha paused.

"Every time I looked at you, my eyes went to the heart on your lips, and it made me think of my wedding. It's only a week away. I want to get married- I have to get married- but I haven't even met my groom, so there are things I don't know about him-" Will didn't want to say how he really felt, but he forced the words out, remembering all the talks of prices and currencies: If he wanted something big, he had to give something big in return. "I'm scared."

Slowly, Bedelia turned back around. Will wondered if she could see how deep his fear went, further down than Will himself had realized until he had stepped foot in this tent. His eyes found a link of chains around Bedelia's throat, and he imagined an invisible binding around his own neck, always holding him back, formed of years of his father's neglect and abuse.

"If wish to win this game, you should forget about your wedding. And if you want to find your sister, you will not find her in the Palazzo. Follow the man with the black heart and blade of silver." Bedelia said calmly.

"Is that the third clue?" Will asked, because even though it was something, he was not sure if it was what he had come here for.

But Bedelia was already gone.

When Will stepped back into the courtyard with Winston (who was full of sand), the brightness of the Palazzo had dimmed. The glow had dulled, making it look less magical, casting the palace into distended shadows. He had used up almost of all of his time. But he dared to hope that by confessing his fears to Bedelia that he had earned the third clue. Maybe he was one step closer to finding Abigail.

When Bedelia had said, *Follow he man with the black heart and blade of silver*, his first thought had been Hannibal, selfish and deceitful. Will could easily imagine his heart being black.

Unfortunately, he could see no sign of the infuriating alpha, or the kissing tent where he had told Will to meet him. He saw a furry clover-green tent and a shimmery emerald one, but no jade-green anything.

Will felt as if the isle itself was playing with him.

He crossed to the emerald tent, Winston trotting alongside him. Bottles covered every surface: Floor, walls, beams, shelves. Glass tinkled in a glittery cascade as he peered inside.

Aside from the female proprietor, the only other people in the tent were a pair of giddy young women. Both hovered in front of a locked glass box full of black bottles with ruby-red labels. All three were omegas by the smell of them, which made Will relax just a little.

"Maybe if we get that girl first and find Legend, we can slip him some of this." one of the young women said to the other.

"They're talking about my romance tonic." the proprietor said.

She stepped in front of Will, greeting him with a sprinzt of something minty.

"Aarroorruuh." Winston went, sniffing the air in delight.

"But I imagine that's not what you're here for. Are you looking for a new scent? We have oils that attract and oils that repel." the woman continued, smiling at Winston.

"Um, no, thank you." Will said, stepping back before the woman could spray him again. "What was in that bottle?"

"Just my way of saying hello."

Will doubted that. He turned to leave, yet something pulled him back into the tent, a voiceless call, drawing him to a crude bookshelf in the rear. Piled with burnt-orange apothecary bottles and vials with labels like *Tincture of Forgetting* and *Extract of Lost Tomorrows*.

A voice in Will's head warned him that he was wasting time- he needed to find Hannibal and his black heart and silver blade and follow him. He started to turn, but a celestial-blue ampoule on a high shelf caught his attention. *Elixir of Protection*.

For a second, Will swore the blue liquid inside pulsed like a heartbeat.

The tent's proprietor retrieved it and handed it to Will. "Do you have enemies?"

"No, no. Just curious." Will hedged.

The woman's eyes were bottle green, an intense concentration of color, and their crinkled edges said, I do not believe you. Yet she kindly pretended otherwise.

"If someone is about to cause you harm, this will stop them. All you need to do is spray a bit in their face." she explained coolly.

"Like you did to me?" Will asked.

"My perfume merely opened your eyes so you would see what you needed."

Will rolled the tiny jar in his palm, barely larger than a vial, yet far heavier than it should be. He imagined the weight resting solidly in his pocket, and the thought was oddly comforting.

"What will this cost me?" he asked, knowing there would be some odd price.

"For you?" The omega looked Will over carefully, taking in his posture, the way he curled into himself, refused to have his back fully to the tent's entrance, and the way he avoided all eye contact. "Tell me who you fear the most."

Will hesitated. Hannibal had warned him about giving away his secrets too freely. He had also told him that to win and find Abigail, he would need to be a little merciless. He imagined this potion could be ruthless, give him an almost unfair advantage over an attacker, although that wasn't the reason Will pushed out the words on a quick, soft breath. "Garret Jacob Hobbs."

With the name came a fearful rush of the scent of cloves and plums, a hand striking him and making him bleed, the same hands making Abigail bruise, blue diamond and amethyst flashing in the light, and kisses to the forehead, moments when their father was loving until the moment he wasn't. Will looked around the tent as the scent and memory of pain flashed through his mind, checking that his father wasn't standing in the tent's doorway.

"This elixir can only be used on a person once. And the effects wear off after two hours." the woman warned him.

"Thank you." Will said, getting distracted.

As soon as he said the words, he thought he spotted Hannibal standing just beyond the border of the next tent. A blur of dark coat and stealthy movements. He swore he looked at him, but then he continued in the opposite direction.

Will darted after him, Winston right beside him, jogging to the cool edge of the courtyard, where the color pavilions had faded away like withered flowers. But Hannibal had disappeared again. The only place to go was an arch to his left.

"Hannibal!" Will called, crossing beneath the same shadowed arch, trailing a narrow path that led to a dreary garden.

But there was no glimpse of Hannibal's ash brown hair behind the cracked, weather statues. No sight of his sharp movements near any of the dying plants. No hint of his musk and wine scent. He had vanished, just like all the colors had seemed to fade from this garden, leaving it bleached and unlovely.

Will searched for another archway Hannibal could have used to exit, but the small garden was a dead-end, leading only to a fountain that was a replica of the one at the entrance, only much shabbier, much more overgrown. The trickle of bubbling water, turning murky in the basin, covered a few pathetic coins and a glass button. The saddest wishing well Will had ever seen.

It made no sense. Hannibal's disappearance, or this neglected plot of earth, left to wither and die amidst a domain so carefully cultivated. Even the air felt off. Fetid and stagnant.

Will could almost feel the sadness of the fountain infecting him, turning his discouragement into a heavy, dreary feeling that choked out life. He wondered what had happened to the plants. He knew how crippling a feeling of bleakness could feel. If not for his determination to protect his siter at all costs, he might have given up long ago.

He probably should have. What was that saying, *No love ever goes unpunished*? In many ways, loving Abigail was a source of constant pain. No matter how hard Will tried to care for his sister, it was never enough to fill the holes his dad and her mother had left. And it wasn't as if Abigail really loved him back, was it? If she did, she wouldn't have risked everything Will wanted by dragging him to this miserable game against his Will. Would never have done his careful plans, all those years of obedience. Of course, she didn't know what had been on their table these past few years, what flesh had actually passed through their lips. But she had to know Will did everything for a reason. Abigail never thought things through. She was selfish and reckless and-

No! Will shook his head firmly and took a deep, heavy breath as Winston nipped his fingertips. None of those thoughts were true. He loved Abigail. Abigail loved him. They loved each other more than anything, even if it was in different ways, even if they had odd and sometimes hurtful ways of showing it. He wanted to find Abigail, more than anything.

It's the fountain. Will realized. Whatever despair he felt was the product of some enchantment, most likely meant to keep anyone from lingering too long.
This garden was hiding something.

Maybe that was why Bedelia had told him to follow Hannibal and his black heart- because Nigel knew that it would lead him here. This must be where the next clue was hidden.

Winston's claws clicked on the stone as they moved forward, Will going to the button he had noticed. It was the second one he had seen tonight. It had to be a clue. Glass buttons like that were very unusual. Will reached into the water to fish it out. And that was when he saw it.

It was so small, so unimportant that his eyes might have skipped over it. Beneath the grim, dirty water, etched into the edge of the basin, were two feathered stags, a teardrop caught in their locked antlers- the symbol of Caraval. It did not feel as magical as the silver crest on the first letter from Legend; of course, nothing felt charmed in this awful garden.

Will took a stick and probed the symbol. Immediately, the water began to drain away, taking every feeling of wretchedness with it, with the stones of the fountain shifted, revealing a winding set of stars that disappeared into a black unknown. It was the kind of staircase Will felt reluctant to venture down, especially when all he had to defend himself with was a stick. And he was running dangerously low on time if he wanted to get back to the inn before sunrise. But if this was where Hannibal had gone and if he was the man with the heart of black and the silver blade, Will needed to follow him to discover the next clue. Either Abigail could be the thing Will chased after, or his fear could be what chased him away.

Trying not to worry that he was making an incredible mistake, Will climbed into the basin, Winston leaping after him. They bounded down the steps together. After the first damp, slick set, sand circled around their feet as they spiraled down into the not-quite dark, the things going deeper than the barrel room back home.

Torches lit the descent once light from above faded, casting dramatic shadows against light-gold bricks that grew darker in shade with each flight. Will estimated them to be three stories below; it felt as if they had climbed into the heart of the Uffizi. A place he was becoming certain they did not belong.

Worries surfaced in his mind. What if the man he had followed wasn't Hannibal? What if Bedelia had been lying? What if he was mistaken about the man with the black heart being Hannibal? Hadn't Hannibal warned him about trusting people? Each fear squeezed an invisible chain around his neck, tempting him to turn around, the links sending chills down his spine.

At the foot of the steps, a corridor stretched out in multiple directions, a snake with more than one head. Dark and tortuous, magnificent and frightening. Cold air blew from one tunnel. Warmth from another. But no footsteps from either. And there was no trace of Hannibal's scent anywhere.

Winston barked.

"How did you get down here?"

Will whirled. Dim light flickered over the mouth the cold corridor, and the red-lipped girl who had rowed them the first night, to Muskrat Inn, stepped out.

"I'm looking for my companion. I saw him-"

"No one else is down here." the girl interrupted. "This isn't a place you-"

Someone screamed. As hot and bright as fire.

A weak voice reminded Will that this was only a game, that the shriek was an illusion. But the girl across from him appeared genuinely scared, and the wail sounded incredibly real. It sent a shiver down his spine; it *felt* real. His thoughts flashed back to the contract he had signed in blood, and the rumors of the woman who had died during the game a few years ago.

"What was that?" Will demanded as Winston barked.

"You need to leave." the girl said, grabbing Will's arm and wrenching him back toward the steps.

Winston growled at this. Another scream echoed off the walls, rocking them, and dust shook off the corridors, mingling with the torchlight, making them flicker to the terrible sound.

It was only for a trembling second, but Will swore he saw, down the corridor, a woman being tied up- the same woman who he had witnessed being carried away earlier. Alana had told him that it was only a performance, but there was no one in this to hear this woman's wails, aside from Will.

"What are they doing to her?!" Will demanded, struggling with the red-lipped girl.

He hoped to get to the woman, but this girl was strong. Will remembered the force and ease with which she had steered the boat.

"Stop fighting me." the girl warned, holding him off despite her smaller size.

"If you go deeper in these tunnels, you'll end up mad, just like her. We're not hurting her; we're helping her. You won't find your friend here, only madness." she continued, knocking Will to his knees at the bottom of the stairs.

A fresh scream punctured her words; this one was sounded male.

"Who was-"

A door slammed shut in Will's face before he could finish, nearly catching Winston in it. It cut off the girl, the stars from the corridor, and the screams from Will's ears. But even (after trying to no avail to get the door open) as Will climbed back up to the courtyard, echoes lingered in his ears like damp on a cloudy day.

That last scream hadn't sounded like Hannibal. Or, at least, that was what Will told himself as he caught a boat to take him back to Muskrat Inn. He reminded himself yet again that it was only a game. But the madness part was starting to feel very real.

If that woman had truly gone insane, Will couldn't help but wonder: Why? And if she hadn't, if she was just another actor, Will could see how going after her, believing her cries of pain

were real, could drive a person mad.

He thought of Abigail. What if she was tied up screaming somewhere? What if the ear in his pocket was real, and was hers? *No*. It was exactly that type of thinking that would drive Will mad. Legend had probably provided an entire wing of luxurious rooms for Abigail; Will could picture her twirling in a grand empty space and eating strawberries dipped in chocolate, her favorite treat, but lamenting about not playing the game herself. Hadn't Hannibal said Legend took excellent care of his guests?

Will hoped he would find Hannibal in the tavern, teasing him about running after someone who looked like him, and how long he had spent inside Bedelia's silken tent. Will convinced himself that Hannibal had given up on waiting for him; he'd gotten bored and taken off, or didn't want to risk getting shut out of the inn before sun-up, so he had tried to find the clue another way. It was a different alpha Will had seen run into the garden. And Bedelia's words had been another trick of the game, or Will had misinterpreted them very much He was certain of all this by the time he made it back to Muskrat Inn. Almost.

The Primavera Tavern was even more crowded than it had been the day before. It smelled of a million mingled scents, sweetened with ale and cider. The air hummed with laughter and boasts. Half a dozen tables were cluttered with windswept omegas and red-cheeked alphas all bragging about their finds- or bemoaning their lack of discoveries.

To Will's great pleasure, he overheard that woman he had met in Abigail's room talk of how she had been taken for a fool by a man who claimed to sell enchanted doorknobs.

"We tried to knob. Put it in the door up there, but it didn't lead us anywhere new!" she said, looking irritated.

"That's because it's just a game." a man replied. "There's really not any magic."

"Oh, I don't think-"

Will would have loved to continue eavesdropping and learning the misfortunes of that woman, as well as possibly learning something new, as the lines between the game and reality were starting to blur just a little too much for him, but a man near the corner caught his eye. Brown, swept back hair, neat clothing. A confident air around him. Hannibal.

Will felt a heady sway of relief. He was all right. He wasn't being tortured; in fact, he looked quite well. His back was turned, but the tilt of his head and the angle of his body made it clear he was talking to a woman, who was seated near him.

Will's relief shifted into something else. If he wasn't even allowed to chat with another alpha because of their make-believe engagement, he was not going to let Hannibal chat up some random omega in front of him. Especially when this particular one was the pregnant redhead who had made off with Will's things. Only now the young woman didn't appear to be with child at all. The bodice of her somewhat scandalous dress was flat and smooth, no longer curving around a stomach heavy with child.

Seething, Will placed a hand on Hannibal's shoulder as he approached.

"Darlin', who is-"

Will's words broke off as three things happened at once. Winston, whose rope he had released, began to growl, the scent of sandalwood and cedar struck him, and he realized he had been very, very mistaken in his desperation and fury.

"I'm sorry. I, uh, I thought you were-"

"Your fiancé?" Mason provided, voice filled with nasty innuendo.

"Mason-"

"Oh, so you remember my name. You didn't just use me for my bed."

His voice was loud. Patrons sitting at the next tables shot Will looks ranging from disgust to desire. One alpha licked his lips, while a group of boys made inappropriate gestures.
The redhead snorted.

"This is the omega you told me about? From the way you described him, I imagined him much prettier."

"I'd been drinking." Mason said.

Heat flooded Will's cheeks, far more than the usual flash of embarrassment. Hannibal might be a liar, but it looked like he was right about Mason's true nature.

Will wanted to say something back to both Mason and the girl, but his throat was tight and his chest was hollow. The alphas at nearby tables were leering and now his clothing was melting from rich, fashionable dark colors to washed-out grays.

Omega slut. He could practically hear the words on tongues, heard it whispered in his father's voice.

He had to get out of here.

Will hoisted the hostile Winston into his arms and wove his way through the tavern, followed by whispers, while that gray kept melting over his clothes, washing everything out. Hot, angry tears burned in his eyes. Embarrassment and shame rolled in his stomach.

This was what he got for pretending he didn't have a real fiancé. And what had he been thinking- touching him like that? Calling him 'darlin' '? He had thought Mason was Hannibal, but did that truly make a difference?

Stupid, stupid Hannibal. Stupid bastard. Stupid Will.

He never should have agreed to this arrangement with him. He wanted to angry with Mason, but it was Hannibal who had created this mess. And Will. Will had done it, too.

He braced himself as he opened the door to his room, expecting tofind Hannibal lounging on the great bed, head resting on a pillow, bangs falling messily over his eyes. The room had the

feeling of him. Cold wind, wicked smiles, and blatant lies. Will felt the shadow of those things as he stepped inside, setting Winston down. But there was no alpha to go with it.

The fire quietly crackled. The lay there, covered in layers of untouched fluff. The sailor had kept his promise about trading days in the room.

Or... Or he had never left Palazzo delgi Uffizi.

Chapter End Notes

Obviously never saw it in the show, but I think a Mason and Freddie interaction could have been pretty interesting. Who knows what these two might get up to here (not me).

Polite questions and comments are always welcome!

Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

Night One of Caraval

Chapter Notes

Forgive any typos; this was written in under an hour and a half. My WIPs have bred and I had to tend to the babies.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Will did not dream of Legend. He did not dress of being scantily clad in clothes he would never wear, nor did he dream of balconies or being thrown off them. He did not dream at all, because he did not truly sleep. Each time he shut his eyes, the corridors beneath Palazzo delgi Uffizi crept into his mind, stretched out behind his eyelids, flickering with torches and screams.

When he opened his eyes, lurking shadows moved where they did not belong. Winston sighed against his side, content and managing to get sleep himself. Will would close his eyes, hearing the soft clicks of his eyelids behind the darkness of them, and the whole cycle repeated.

He told himself that it was all in his head, the shadows and sounds. Wails and footsteps and crackling noises. The feel of something sliding down his throat, choking him, cutting off his air, hands caressing his face.

Until something cracked that was definitely in his room.

Will sat up carefully. The dying fire hissed and made a glass-like tinkling sound as it collapsed and tossed bits of light here and there. But the noise he had heard was louder than that.

It came again. Another crack, a thump, right before the hidden door to the room flew open and Hannibal stumbled in. "Hello, Mr. Graham."

"What are-" Will began to growl, breaking off.

Even in the poor light he could tell something was not right. Hannibal's uneven steps. The tilt of his head. The thickness of his voice. And his scent. The musk was there and so was the

blood-like scent... But it was drowned out by the scent of actual blood.

"What happened?" Will demanded, leaping out of bed, half-thinking to cover himself with a blanket.

"I can assure you, it is not as bad as it looks." Hannibal said, but he swayed as if drunk, and the smell of blood was thick.

"Who did this?"

"Remember, it is only a game." Hannibal smiled, twisting in the firelight, right before collapsing on the lounge.

"Hannibal!"

Will rushed to his side. His entire body was cold, as if he had been outside this whole time. He wanted to shake him, to wake him up, hesitating as he thought what you were supposed to do when someone was bleeding badly. So badly. There was so much blood. *Very real blood*. It was matted in Hannibal's ash brown hair and stained Will's hands as he tried to haul him into a better position, Winston prancing and whining.

"I'll be right back- I'm going to go get help. Stay awake. Do you hear me? Stay awake!" Will said, kicking Hannibal's foot sharply.

"No-"

Hannibal seized his arm, very much awake. His fingers felt as if they were coated in frost, like the rest of him.

"Don't go. It is only a head wound; they often look much worse than they are. They tend to bleed a lot. Fetch a towel and a basin. Please."

His fingers tightened on the word please.

"It will raise far too many questions if you bring someone else up here. The 'vultures', as you called them, they will believe it is part of the game."

"But it's not?"

Hannibal's head wobbled from side to side as his cold hand fell from Will's naked arm.

Will did not believe that the vultures were the only reason Hannibal wanted to avoid attention, but he hurriedly fetched two towels and a basin from a nightstand, filling it with water from the bathroom. Within a minute the water was red and brown. After a few minutes Hannibal began to warm a little. He was right about the wound; it did not appear to be as bad as Will had first thought.

The gash was shallow, though Hannibal tilted to the side as he tried to sit upright.

"You should probably stay down. Are you hurt anywhere else?" Will said, placing a firm hand on the alpha's shoulder.

"If you could check here... I would appreciate it." Hannibal said, lifting his shirt, revealing his muscled abdomen, and Will might have blushed, if not for the blood that coated it.

Using the cleaner of the two towels as Winston nuzzled Hannibal's fingers, Will cautiously pressed it against Hannibal's skin, moving the cloth in slow, circular motions. He had never touched a young alpha- or any alpha or man or woman- like this. He was careful only to touch Hannibal with the towel, though his fingers were tempted to travel elsewhere. To see if his skin was as soft as it looked, to explore the texture of the scars that matched the ones on his back, though they were far fewer. Would the count look like this, lean and muscular, but not overly so?

"Hey! Keep your eyes open!" Will ordered as he pushed those thoughts away.

He needed to focus on his task.

"This cut is probably going to need stitches." Will said, yet as his cloth wiped away the blood, it revealed smooth, unbroken flesh.

"Wait, I can't find a wound."

"I am now certain there isn't one. But that did feel rather pleasant." Hannibal said, arching his back slightly as he slid into a slightly more stable position.

"You bastard!" Will growled, pulling his hands away, resisting the sudden compulsion to bite the alpha, if only because he was already injured.

"What really happened? Don't lie to me, or I will drag you out into the hall and leave you there."

"You do not need to make any threats, Will. I remember our deal. I am not planning to stay or to steal your virtue. I merely wished to give you this." Hannibal said, groaning softly as he sat up straighter.

He reached into his pocket. Will noted that his knuckles bruised or bloody, on either hand. If he had been in a fight, he hadn't fought back... Or he had used the knife sheathed at his hip.

Again he was about to ask what had happened, with a small sense of dread, when Hannibal opened his hand.

Glinting. A leather band etched with waves.

"Is this the object you were so worried about?" Hannibal asked, placing his dad's watch in his hand unceremoniously, as if he were merely handing him one of the bloody towels.

"How did you get this?" Will whispered.

Though it truly didn't matter where he had recovered it. He had gone through the trouble of getting it back. Despite Hannibal's rough handling, the band was not bandaged, the face was not cracked, the edges not dented or scratched. During Will's years of studies, Hobbs had required he learn the proper way to say thank you in a dozen languages, even if he did not speak a single word of the rest of them. But none of those phrases and words seemed adequate in this moment.

"Is that how you got wounded?" Will asked.

"If you believe I would get injured over a trinket, you are thinking far too highly of me again." Hannibal said, pushing off the sofa and heading for the door.

"Stop. You can't leave in your condition." Will protested.

Hannibal tilted his head to the side, though it looked like, for a moment, the rest of his body was going to follow.

"Is that an invitation to stay?"

Will hesitated.

Hannibal was injured.

That still didn't make it appropriate.

The words that had chased him as he had fled Primavera earlier sounded in his head, taunting him-

"I did not think so." Hannibal said, reaching for the knob.

"Wait-" Will said, getting to his feet, stopping Hannibal again.

"You still haven't said what happened to you. Does it have anything to do with the tunnels beneath Palazzo delgi Uffizi?"

Hannibal paused, hand hovering over the knob as if suspended by an invisible thread.

"What are you talking about?"

"I think you know exactly what I'm talking about, Mr. Lecter. I followed you." Will said, the second set of screams he had heard distinctly playing in his mind.

Hannibal's expression sharpened; his bangs shadowed a brow pulled tight.

"I was not in any tunnels. If you were following someone, it was not me."

"If you weren't the one down there, then how did this happen?"

"I swear to you, I have never heard about these tunnels." Hannibal said, dropping his hand from the doorknob and taking a step closer to Will.

"Tell me exactly what you saw down there."

The fire in the hearth finally died, sending a gray coil of smoke in the air, leaving only the feeble embers to give them illumination, the perfect setting for things better said in whispers.

Will wanted to doubt Hannibal. If he had been down there it would explain at least a few things. Then again, if he had been the other person he had heard screaming, he imagined more than the alpha's head would bear a wound.

"I found the tunnels after I left the fortune-teller's tent."

Will detailed everything that had followed, leaving out the bit about how he had believed Hannibal had a heart of black. After Hannibal had given him the watching he had stopped believing that was entirely true, though he still watched him carefully for any signs of deception, in the dim gray, whisper-perfect light. Will wanted to trust Hannibal. He did. But after a lifetime of mistrust and learning that he had put his faith in the wrong person, it felt impossible. Hannibal still appeared unsteady on his feet, but he imagined it was mostly from the cut and perhaps the impact of the blow.

"Do you think that be where we'll find Abigail?"

"That is not how Legend works. His game might lead us through screaming corridors to find a clue to your sister, but I doubt he is actually keeping her there." Hannibal said, flashing his teeth, reminding Will of that smile that night on Wolf Trap's beach.

"Legend prefers that his prisoners feel as if they are guests."

Will tried to figure out if he was just being dramatic. He had never heard of Legend taking anyone captive. But Hannibal had something similar before, and his use of the word *prisoners* left Will with the same uneasy feeling he had had when he had wondered why Legend had abducted Abigail, of all people, in the first place.

"If Legend doesn't have Abigail locked up, then what exactly is he doing with her?" he demanded.

"Ah. There we are. You are finally beginning to ask the right questions." Hannibal said, satisfaction in his tone.

His eyes met Will's. Something flickered in them, something dangerous, predator, as Will had seen before, right before his eyes slid shut and he swayed again.

"Hannibal!"

Will caught both his arms, but the abrupt dead weight was too much for his hasty catch, and the couch was too far. Will pressed against him. Hannibal had gone from cold as a winter night to almost feverish. Heat poured from his skin through his clothing, warming Will in an unexpected way as he held the alpha against the door with his body.

"Will." Hannibal murmured.

His eyes flickered back open. Maroon. The color of wine and liquid lust and desire.

"I think you had better lie back down." Will said, starting to try to get a handle on the other man.

Hannibal's arms suddenly shot around his waist. As hot as his chest and just as solid.

Will tried to wiggle free, but the look on Hannibal's face stopped him. He had never stared at him like that before. Sometimes he had caught Hannibal looking at him as if he wanted him be Will's undoing, but just then it was as if he wanted Will to undo him. It was probably just the fever and head wound. But for a moment, Will swore Hannibal wanted to kiss him. Really, truly kiss him, not like when he had been teasing at the Uffizi. Will's heartbeat quickened and every inch of him felt sensitive to every part of Hannibal, as if they were blurring together, as Hannibal's hands roamed up his back. Will knew he should have pulled away, but Hannibal's hands seemed to know exactly what they were doing, and he found himself letting the alpha guide him, gently bringing him closer as his lips parted, as his hand cupped his cheek.

Will gasped.

Hannibal's hands froze. Will's tiny, breath sound seemed to jolt him back to reality. His eyes opened wider, as if he suddenly remembered that he thought Will was a silly omega afraid to play a game. He released Will and cold air replaced the heat of his body.

"I believe it is time I left." Hannibal reached for the knob. "I will meet you in the tavern right after sunset. We can go take a look at those tunnels together."

Hannibal stumbled out the door, leaving Will wondering what had just happened. It would have been a mistake to kiss him, yet he felt... Disappointed. As cold as river water on a hot summer day, it wrapped around him like an evening fog rolling off said river, making Will feel hidden enough to acknowledge that he wanted to experience far more of Caraval's- of the world's- pleasures than he ever would have admitted out loud.

It wasn't until Will had crawled back into bed, pulling Winston close to try to replace the warmth he suddenly felt empty without, that he realized Hannibal had avoided telling him how exactly he had been injured and coated in a frightening amount of blood that was not his own. Or, how he had managed to make it back to Muskrat Inn, long after the sun and risen and the doors had locked.

Chapter End Notes

Honestly, I was picturing the scene of them almost kissing and Hannibal holding Will very similar to Mizumono, though with some obvious differences.

Welcome to a soft entry into Hannibal's darker side in this fic.

Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

Night Two of Caraval

Chapter Notes

Sorry this took so long! I wrote and published five other stories in the downtime between the chapters and didn't have time for this one. No matter how long it is between updates, this fic will NOT be abandoned. I promise I will finish it, even if I don't know how long that will take. We're nearing the halfway point here; my rough guess is this will have around forty-three chapters.

Thanks to everyone who left comments and kudos! They're lovely.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Will didn't notice the roses at first.

Dark, dark blue like the walls of the room. That must have been why he hadn't taken notice of them before he had fallen asleep. Or, at least, that was what he told himself. Someone hadn't come in while he was sleeping.

But what he really meant was, *Legend had not come in while he was sleeping*.

Though his early notes had felt special, almost like private treasures, something about this latest gift felt like a warning. He had no proof that the flowers actually were from Legend. There was no note next to their crystal vase, but he couldn't think of who else they could possibly be from. Four roses, one for every night that remained of Caraval.

It was the fifteenth. The game officially ended at dawn on the nineteenth, and his wedding was on the twentieth. Will only had this night and the following to find Abigail, or at the *very* latest by dawn on the eighteenth, if he wanted to leave the island in time for his wedding.

Will imagined his father could keep his and Abigail's kidnapping a secret from the count if his fiancé arrived on Wolf Trap early; there were old superstitions about spouses not seeing each other before the wedding. However, there would be no salvaging the wedding if Will never showed up for it.

Nudging Winston (another assurance that someone hadn't come in while he was sleeping, because surely the dog would have noticed), Will reached into his pocket and pulled out the note with the clues.

This is your first clue on the road to find her.

The others with not be so easy to retrieve.

Some with question your sanity

And all that you believe.

Clue number two you will discover at the scene of her departure.

Number three you must earn.
Picture card of Palazzo delgi Uffizi

Number four will cost you something valuable.

Number five requires a leap of faith.

Most of you will fail,

But one will surely succeed.

You have five nights to find the girl, ***TWO NIGHTS***

And Legend's wish will be yours.

Will no longer believed that Hannibal was the third blue, the man with the heart made of black and blade of silver. But he couldn't dismiss the feeling he was keeping things to

himself. Will continued to wonder how he had been wounded, how he had retrieved his watch, and about that almost-kiss. Though he couldn't think about the kiss now. Not when he was marrying the count in only five days.

And because all that mattered was finding Abigail.

Will hurried to make himself look presentable, but his clothes were much less of a rush. They took their time, becoming dark pants, sturdy boots, and a crisp white shirt, the jacket turning dark, making the white pop. It was all well-tailored and the dark color of the jacket made his eyes seem brighter than normal, deeper and bluer.

Simple yet complimenting him, and he had the feeling these tricky clothes had gone to the extra trouble to impress Hannibal. Or maybe he was only hoping it would have that effect. Hannibal's abrupt departure last night had left him with a host of battling feelings, and even more questions.

Will was prepared to press the sailor for answers. Thoroughly interrogate him if that was what it took. But when he got down to meet him, Winston trotting happily beside him, Will found the tavern mostly empty. The soft light illuminated only one patron- a black-haired woman hunched over a notebook, sitting by the green glass fireplace. She didn't look up when Will came in, though others did, as the hour waxed by and the room began to fill.

There was still no sign of Hannibal.

Had he taken what Will had learned about the tunnels and left him waiting in the tavern so he could go find clues by himself?

Maybe distrust shouldn't have been his first response all the time.

Hannibal had his faults, but even though he had left Will on a couple of occasions, each time it was only for a short time, he always came back. Had something happened? What if his injuries had been worse than Will had concluded last night? Should he go look for him? But what if he left and then Hannibal showed up? It could be that he had merely overslept, wherever it was he was sleeping.

With every thought, he watched as his clothes changed again, becoming less noticeable, the color darkening, the fabric changing. A blue shirt, a dark vest. The jacket turned into a shorter, albeit warmer coat, dull and sturdy. His pants rougher. He somehow gained a sturdy pair of gloves. It was all dull and practical, rather than anything meant to impress. Reflecting his current state of mind and his worries.

Will tried to relax, hoping Hannibal would arrive soon and his clothes would stop doing this. Glimpsing his reflection in the glass table, he looked almost as if he were mourning, with his expression and dark colors, but that didn't stop people from trying to talk to him. Winton sat guard beside him, watchful, but he still did not react to anyone as he has Mason.

"Aren't you the brother of that missing girl?" one patron asked, and suddenly there was a crowd around him.

Will wanted to hide in himself; he hated attention.

"I really don't know anything. I don't." Will said, repeating the phrase until the entire crowd had finally departed.

"You should've tried to have some fun with them."

The woman who had been sitting quietly, poring over a notebook, appeared at Will's table. She was pretty, with warm olive skin, dressed boldly in a golden gown, daringly sleeveless. It had wine-colored accents. The woman sat in the chair across from Will, offering her hand to Winston to sniff. She was approved.

"If I were you, I'd tell them all sorts of things. Throw them off the trail. Like you saw your sister arm-in-arm with a man in a purple cape, or that you found a feather caught on her coat that looked as though it had come from a stag." she continued.

Stags don't have feathers. Will thought, then thought of the symbol of Caraval.

For a moment, Will just stared at the curious woman. It didn't even seem to occur to her that Will might not want to speak with her, or that he didn't want to spread lies about Abigail, or that he was waiting for someone. This woman was like that wonderfully warm day in the middle of the Cold Season, either unaware or uncaring that she did not belong.

"People don't want the truth here, you know. They don't expect it." the woman said, undeterred.

"A lot of them don't expect to win the wish, or want it, or think they can. They just come for a good time, an adventure. You might as well help give 'em one. It must be in you, otherwise you wouldn't have been invited."

The woman sparkled, from her metallic skirt to the matching gold lines of paint around her angular eyes.

She didn't look like a thief, but after Will's experience with the redhead the night before, he wasn't feeling particularly trusting. Even if Winston seemed to like her.

"Who are you? And what do you want?" Will asked, trying to sound cold.

"My name is Beverly. And maybe I don't want anything other than a bit of company."

"Everyone who is playing wants something."

"Then I guess it's a good thing I'm not playing-" Beverly started, breaking off as a new couple approached.

They were barely older than Will, if not the same age, and classically alpha/omega. They were obviously newlywed; the man held his young bride's hand with the care of someone not used to holding something so important, something as valuable as the finest treasure to him.

" 'Scuse us, sir." he said, speaking with a foreign accent that took Will a moment to understand.

"We were wonderin', are you really Abigail's brother?"

Beverly gave him an encouraging smile. "He is, and he'd be happy to answer your questions."

They instantly brightened at this.

"Oh, thank you, sir. Yesternight when we made it to 'er room, it was picked clean. We were jus' hopin' for some bit o' a clue."

The mention of Abigail's scavenged, ravaged room and the image of vomiting her severed ear that was linked to it set something ablaze in Will, yet the couple seemed so sincere. They didn't seem to be mercenaries who would sell things to the highest bidders. Their threadbare clothes were in worse shape than the clothes Will had abandoned in the see, yet their clasped hands and hopeful expressions reminded Will of what the game was truly meant to be. Or what he had once thought it was meant to be. Joy. Magic. Wonder. Adventure.

"I would tell you where my sister was, but I haven't seen her-" Will hesitated as their faces fell, and he remembered what Beverly had just told him about expectations at Caraval.

"No, actually, I remember now. She asked me to meet her- near a fountain with an angel about to take flight."

It sounded like a blatant lie to Will's ears, but the couple lapped it up like Winston had the food Will had given him, their face alight at the prospect of a clue.

"Oh, I think I saw dat statue. Is it the one with a 'ottom covered in 'earls?" the young woman said, eyes shining.

Will was not sure what exactly she was trying to say, her accent thicker than her husbands, but he nodded and wished them the best of luck as they departed.

"See? Look how happy you just made them." Beverly said, smiling.

"Yeah, by lying to them." Will muttered.

"You're missing the whole point here, Will. They didn't travel here for the truth, they came for an adventure, and you just sent them on one. Maybe they won't find anything, maybe they will; the game has a way of rewarding people just for trying. Either way they're happier than you. I've been watching you and you've been sitting here as dejected as a kicked puppy for the past hour." Beverly said, arching her eyebrows at him for a second.

"You would be too, if your sister was missing."

"I have sisters and trust me, I wouldn't. You're on a magical isle, and all you can think about is what you don't have."

"But Abigail-"

"Is your sister. Yeah, I know." Beverly cut in.

"I also know you'll find her when all this is over, whether you or someone else finds her first, and you'll wish you hadn't spent your evenings sitting in this boring tavern feeling sorry for yourself."

It was the exact sort of thing Abigail would have said, if not worded a bit differently. A masochistic part of Will felt that he owed his sister some sort of tithe made of misery, but maybe it was the opposite. Knowing Abigail, she would be more disappointed in him for not having a good time during Caraval, on Legend's isle.

"I wasn't planning on sitting here all night. I'm waiting for someone." Will grumbled.

"Is that someone late, or are you early?" Beverly asked, tipping her head.

"I hate to tell you, but I don't think whoever it is you're waiting for is going to be showing up."

Will's eyes darted to the tavern's entrance for the hundredth time that evening, still hoping that Hannbal would walk through the moment he did. He had been so sure the alpha would come, but if there was a respectable time to wait for someone, it had come and gone a long time ago.

Will rose from his chair.

"Does this mean you've decided not to sit around anymore?" Beverly asked, eyes gleaming.

She rose from her own seat, clutching her notebook close, as the back door of the tavern swung open once more.

A pair of giggling young women, younger than Abigail, stepped in, followed by the very last person Will wanted to see. He strode in like a foul wind wrapped in expensive clothes and muddied shoes, more disheveled than just his purposefully-messy hair- Mason's clothes were rumbled as if he had slept in them, and his jacket was gone.

Will recalled how Hannibal had said Mason wanted Legend's wish to fix something that had happened during an earlier Caraval. Right now, Mason looked more desperate than ever to get it, and the look in his eyes was dangerous for anyone who stood in his way. Winston growled low beside Will.

Will hoped his eyes would pass over them as he reached down and took Winston's collar (he had foolishly discarded the rope). After their last encounter, he wasn't ready for another confrontation with him, nor did Will wish to speak this man ever again; waiting for Hannibal had sliced to his nerves to ribbons and turned his clothes dark. But even as Will hoped that Mason wouldn't notice them, as he prayed that Winston wouldn't race forward and attack the man, his eyes continued to follow him. His hand had slid out of his pocket, and he held a long, glinting something.

Specifically, a knife. A blade of silver.

Chapter End Notes

Yay! Beverly. I love Beverly, and I'm so happy I was able to put her in this.

Also, if anyone knows how to cross things out on ao3, I would really appreciate that information. Couldn't get the aesthetic I was going for because I couldn't figure it out.

Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

Night Two of Caraval

Chapter Notes

Big chapter, guys! Here we go.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Follow the man with the heart made of black and blade made of silver.

Bedelia's words rushed back to Will as Mason's eyes fell on him. The look he gave him he was pure hatred. But rather than frightening Will, it ignited something inside him; he imagined this was a way for the game to test his resolve to play without Hannibal at his side.

When Mason barged his way out Primavera's back door, Will dashed after him, Winston at his side. He didn't realize how wonderfully warm it had been in the tavern until they emerged into the bitter evening. Crisp, like the first cusp of autumn, like a freshly picked apple and just as sweet, hints of burnt sugar, apple, and buttery richness scenting the charcoal night air. Around him, the people on the street were as thick as tangles of thorns.

Will thought he spotted Mason slip onto a covered bridge, but once he got there it contained nothing but lantern light, leading to a disappointing dead end. All Will on the other side was an alley made of brick walls, and a sider cart manned by a ginger haired youth about Abigail's age.

"Want some burnt-sugar sider?" the beta asked, his scent mixing well with his wares.

"It will help you see more clearly."

"No, I'm looking for someone. A man a bit older than me, an alpha. Messy brown hair and glasses. He has an... Unpleasant expression."

"I think he bought some cider last night, but I haven't seen him tonight. Good luck!" the boy called as Will dashed over the bridge, Winston on his heels.

Once they were on the other side again, Will spied a number of men with untidy brown hair and rich clothes that were looking a little rough around the edges- at this point in the same, everyone was starting to look that way- but no one had a silver knife or Mason's

unmistakable scent. Will continued his way through the crowd, catching a glimpse of what looked like someone with a small silver knife weaving their way up a set of emerald stairs a few shops pass Muskrat Inn.

Picking up his pace and whistling to Winston, Will rushed to follow the black-hearted man. He tore up the stairs and another covered bridge. But again, he wound up at a dead end with another ginger-haired beta selling cider, his apple-like scent weaving in his wares.

"Wait-" Will said, pausing. "Weren't you just over there?" He pointed vaguely, no longer quite sure where he meant.

"I haven't moved from this spot all night, but the bridge you just crossed likes to go different places quite often." the boy said.

He smiled, brushing his curls from his face.

Will looked back toward the bridge, its lights fluttering as if they were winking. Two days ago he would have said it was his eyes playing tricks on him, or the wind, but that thought didn't even touch the edge of his mind. He wasn't sure when it had happened, but he had stopped doubting the magic.

"Are you sure you don't want some?" The boy stirred the cider, sending fresh curls of apple-scented steam into the air.

"Oh-" Will was about to say no, his standard response, but then he remembered something. "Did you say this would help me see things more clearly?"

"You won't find a brew like this anywhere else." the boy said, Winston sniffing the air and barking.

A welcome chill prickled Will's skin. What if this was the reason Bedelia had told her to follow Mason? Maybe if he drank the cider his eyes would be sharp enough to find the clue he needed. He had no fear of it being poison, though it might be a little more than he was anticipating.

He paused, remembering the instructions, and checked them again. *Number four will cost you something valuable*.

"What do you want as payment?" Will asked cautiously.

"Not much- just the last lie you told."

It didn't seem like much of a price. But even if the cider was not the next clue, it would likely give him some kind of edge, which he needed.

Feeling lucky that he had taken Beverly's advice in the tavern, Will leaned in close and whispered the lie he had told about the fountain. The boy looked disappointed, clearly having been hoping for something better, but he handed Will the cup all the same.

Browned sugar and melted butter with hints of cream and toasted cinnamon, all wrapped around apple crispness. It tasted like the best parts of Caraval, mixed with just a hint of heat.

"It's delicious, but I don't see anything different..." Will said, frowning.

"It takes a minute or two to kick in. I promise, you won't be disappointed." the boy said and, with that, began to push his cart in the direction of the tricky bridge.

Will took another sip of cider, but now it tasted too sweet, making his teeth ache, as if it were trying to mask a harsher flavor. Something wasn't right. Will's head swirled, feeling as though a gentle fog was wrapping around some of his thoughts. He glanced back at the boy, watching in shock as his skin shifted to an ashy gray, while his clothes turned pure black.

He blinked, confused and unsettled, only to be more disturbed when he opened his eyes again.

Now *everything* was in shades of black and gray. Even the candlelight spilling over the bridge was foggy gloom instead of golden warmth. Will tried not to panic, but his heart was beating faster as he staggered across the bridge and returned to a world that was dull and colorless.

Caraval had shifted to black and white, and his vision was getting murky. He couldn't see.

Will dropped the cider, noting in the back of his mind he could still see it, that it was crisp and sharp and glowing buttery-gold, leaking a trail over the stones as it flowed over them. Winston lapped it up; the cider-seller was nowhere to be scene. He was probably laughing at Will for falling for his trick while hunting for new victims.

Will looked up, rubbing his eyes, trying to see beyond the dull, unfocused grays, blacks, and whites, and his gaze landed on the tavern's back exit. Beverly had just stepped outside, her bright dress now charcoal.

"You look terrible. I guess you didn't catch the young man you were after?" the beta asked, her wintergreen scent sharp in his nose.

Will shook his head, heart thumping. Behind Beverly, the door to the tavern was closing. Will scanned the inside the best he could quickly, but he did not see Hannibal, and doubted he was in there.

"I think... I think I fucked up." Will said, almost letting out a pathetic whine.

"Then make it into something better." Beverly said, flashing him a too-white smile.

She strolled down the coddled street as if the world could crumple around her and she would just keep going, unbothered and untouched. Will wished he could feel like that, but the game seemed to be constantly working against him, and he guessed it was easy for Beverly, since she was observing. No one had stolen her sister or the color from her world. Her partner hadn't abandoned her. She wasn't carrying her sister's ear in her pocket, she was just walking down the street as if the earth had fallen away and she glided over air. The only thing she

held onto securely was the battered journal pinned to her hip. It shimmered crisp in Will's vision, brownish green, the color of forgotten things left to rot.

It was unattractive, but-

Will's thoughts staggered to a halt. The notebook was in color! An ugly color. But it a world of black and white, it called to Will like lights across a field, like a lighthouse on a stormy night, glowing bright and clear. Maybe that was how the cider worked? It took away the colors and sharpness of everything Will could see so he could see what really mattered- or find the next clue.

Number four will cost you something valuable.

Bedelia's words had really been clue number three. After Will had followed the man with the heart made of black and the blade of silver, he had found the cider, which had changed his sight- costing him something valuable.

Will's chest now fluttered with excitement, rather than panic. He hadn't been tricked; he had been given what he needed to find the fourth clue.

He followed Beverly, the journal guiding him through the colorless murk, the woman stopping in front of a busy waffle-maker. He dipped his pastries in the darkest of chocolates before passing it to Beverly in exchange for a glimpse into her journal.

Carefully, Will tried to sneak a peek as well.

"Hey! No cheating. If you want to see what's inside, you'll have to pay me, just like everyone else." Beverly scolded, snapping it shut.

"What sort of something?" Will asked, Winston brushing against his leg.

Something warm seeped through his pants; Winston was drooling.

"Do you always think of what you're giving up, rather than what you're gaining? Some thing sare worth pursuit, regardless of the cost, you know." Beverly said, beckoning Will onto a side street.

It was hung with gloom-casting lanterns, smelling of flowers and secrets and lost love. The road narrowed, a canal hugging one sdie as it curved around to a carousel covered in roses.

"A song for a donation." A man in front of a pipe organ held out a hand, his accent thick.

"Try to play something pretty." Beverly said, dropping something too small for Will to make out into the man's hand.

The organist began to play a melancholy tune, and the carousel began to move, spinning slowly at first. Will imagined that if Abigail were here, she would have hopped on and explored the carved dragons, tigers, stags, dogs, horses, boars, and more, plucking a red rose and tucking it into her hair as she encouraged Will to join her.

Red!

Will watched as the rose-decked carousel continued to spin around and around, shedding brilliant red petals on the path. A few landed on Beverly's waffle, sticking in the chocolate. They were as brilliant and velvety as spilled bloody, sharp and bright.

Will couldn't tell if his senses were coming back, or if the carousel was important in some way, for at that exact moment, as he realized he could see the rich red of the petals, a gentleman wearing a pair of goggles like Will imagined an alchemist might wear walked by. Like everything else, he was painted in shades of gray, black, and white, except for the crimson cravat around his neck. It was the deepest hue of red Will had ever seen, aside from when his father had butchered Elise. The man's face was just as eye-catching. He possessed the kind of dark good looks, sharp and strong, that made Will wonder why no one else was staring with him.

He debated about following. This man was mystery and unanswered questions. But something about him made feel cautious, like he was watching a predator. He moved with the same predator grace as Hannibal, but it was different. It had an edge to it that was a little too dangerous, a little too powerful, and it wasn't just his impressive size and apparent strength, either. Even though the colors and the man called to him, the call of Beverly's journal was just as strong.

The organist's song picked up speed, and the carousel whirled faster and faster. Petals landed in more than just Beverly's snack. They flew like a blizzard, until the path in front of them turned to red velvet and canal beside them transformed into blood, leaving the carousel naked save for the animals guarded by thorns.

The few other people around clapped, Winston sniffing and snorting at the petals until they stuck to his shiny black nose.

Will felt as there was a deeper lesson here, but he could not grasp it, could not see it. His vision was back in full color, and just as sharp as ever. The gentleman with the goggles had almost disappeared from view, yet Will continued to feel an unwanted pull toward him. If he had been wearing a top hat, he might have wondered if the stranger was Legend. Or maybe this enigmatic young man was a decoy Legend that had been placed to lure him, and others, away from the actual clue. Earlier that night, as he had looked at the bridge with its winking lights, Will would have sworn he had felt Legend's eyes on him, spying on his attempts to figure out his clues.

Will only had a moment left to make his decision- if he was going to follow the man, or try to look in Beverly's journal, the only thing untouched by the red petals. If Will's theory about the cider was right, both the man and the journal had significance, but only one would lead him closer to Abigail. He turned to Beverly.

"If I do make this trade to look in your notebook, what is it, exactly, that I'm gaining? Is it the fourth clue?"

"It's possible; lots of things are." Beverly said, cryptic.

"The rules only said there were five clues."

"Is that what they really said? Or just how you interpreted them? It's like evidence of crimes or actions. There are many ways that things can look on the surface, pointing to different things, different people. There is plenty of it. Some of it big and obvious, others just little traces people often overlook. Evidence can tell you a lot, but it's not the only thing you need to win. This game is like a person. If you truly want to play it right, you have to learn the entire story. It's history. What brought everything to this moment." Beverly said, managing to catch his eyes.

"I know about its history. My nana told me stories ever since I was a little kid." Will said.

"Yeah, tales passed down from a grandma. I'm sure they're accurate." Beverly said, taking a bite of her waffle, teeth ripping and bleeding the rose petals, as she headed down a new path.

Will glanced around for the man with the goggles a final time. But he was already gone. He had missed that chance. He couldn't lose Beverly as well.

The pretty beta was now in the middle of buying edible silver bells, and coin-size cakes dipped in glitter that made Will think of stardust. As Will followed with Winston loping at his side, he imagined Beverly would get a terrible a stomachache if she ate all that, or would not be able to manage carrying it, but she continued to buy from each vendor who asked for a trade. Will discovered that Beverly believed in saying yes whenever possible. Conversations paused as she bought confetti candies that glowed like the fireflies Will had seen at the entrance, a glass of drinkable gold, and everlasting hair dye- *for those silver hairs you want to be rid of forever*- though Beverly looked far too young for that last one.

"So." Will said as their motley trio wove onto a street full of shops with pointy roofs but blessedly free of vendors.

He was ready to make a deal, but he wasn't going to jump in blind, as he had done before.

"The history of Caraval is recorded in your notebook?"

"In a way." Beverly replied.

"Prove it. Show me your evidence." Will said firmly.

To his astonishment, Beverly offered the notebook.

Will hesitated; it seemed too easy.

"I thought you would only let me see inside if I gave something in return."

"Don't worry, you won't be bound by any deal unless you want to see more. The pictures that would help you are locked up with magic." She said *magic* as if it were a private joke.

Will took the book cautiously, his gloves brushing softly across the cover. Thin and light but somehow full of countless pages; every time Will turned to one, two more seemed to appear behind it, all of them covered with fantastical pictures. Queens and kings, pirates and sailors,

assassins and maidens. Grand ships the size of islands and tiny slips of wood that looked like the boat he and Hannibal had-

"Wait- there are pictures of me."

Will flipped through the next few pages. Beverly's art showed him on the boat with Hannibal. Trudging half-naked to the clock shop. Arguing behind the gates of the mysterious house.

"How did...? These were private!" Will exclaimed.

Thank the saints there were no compromising pictures of him in the room with Hannibal, but there *was* a very vivid piece of art showing him fleeing from Mason with Winston in his arms, every eye in the tavern looking on with judgement.

"How did you get these?" Will whispered, face burning.

With anger or shame, he wasn't sure. He turned back to the picture of him in the boat with Hannibal. He remembered the eerie feeling of being watched when they had first arrived. But this was far worse than that.

"Why are there so many drawings of me? I hardly see anyone else in this."

"This year's game isn't about other people. Other participants aren't missing their sister."

When he had first arrived on the isle, the idea of being Legend's special guest had made Will feel privileged. For the first time in a long time, or maybe even his entire life, he had felt special. Chosen. Not just some docile omega whose sole value lay in being paired to a rich alpha. But once again, rather than feeling as though he were playing the game, it seemed as though the game was playing with him.

His stomach twisted almost painfully with trepiadation. Will didn't like being toyed with, but what made him even more uneasy was the question why, out of all the people in the world, Legend would choose to make this year's game about him and his sister. The day in the clock shop Hannibal's comment made it seem as if it had something to do with his appearance, but now Will felt there was something else, something more he wasn't seeing.

"Back in the tavern you asked me who I was." Beverly went on, not seeming to notice the storm happening inside of him. "I'm not a player. I'm a histographer. I record the history of Caraval through pictures."

"I've never heard of a histographer."

"Then you're lucky to have met me, huh?" Beverly said, looking amused as she plucked the journal back.

Will didn't think luck had anything to do with their meeting. He couldn't deny that what he had just glimpsed in the journal's pages had been disturbingly accurate, but even if this beta really was a *histographer*, Will wasn't sure if he believed she had only come to observe.

"Now that you've glimpsed what I have to offer, I've got to tell you, while I might show the occasional peek to vendors on the streets, what I'm offering you is a rare opportunity. I'm not the only artist who has stained the pages. Every true story from every Caraval there has ever been is in here. If you choose to examine all the stories inside, you'll see who has won and how they did it." Beverly said, sounding as if she were presenting solid facts in court.

As she spoke, Will thought of Mason, then Hannibal. He wondered what had happened when they had each played before. Other stories came to mind as well, like the woman who had died years ago. Will's nana, who claimed to have charmed people in her purple dress. Will doubted that he would actually find his nana in the book, but there was one person he would, without a doubt, see: *Legend*.

If this book detailed the true history of Caraval, then Legend was certain to be featured in it. Peter, the boy from the first night, described the game as a mystery to be solved. And the first clue said: *This girl was last seen with Legend*. It made sense that if Will found Legend, he would find Abigail as well, without having to search for the next two clues... Or this was one of the clues.

"All right. Tell me what exactly it is that you want for another look in there." Will said, feeling bold.

"Excellent." Beverly said, smiling.

She appeared to sparkle even more, if that was possible. She led Will past a button-lined path leading to a hatter and haberdashery shaped like a top hat. Then she stopped in front of a clothing shop.

Three stories high, made of all glass to better display brightly lit clothing in every material and shade. Shirts, pants, gowns, dresses, skirts, jackets, coats; things for both men and women alike. Things the color of late-night smoke, early-morning sunshine, and waves that crashed on pristine shores. Each item seemed to speak of its own adventure, with unique prices to match:

the thing you regret most
your worst fear
a secret you've never told a soul

One suit only cost a recent nightmare- an easy payment for Will- but it was a purple-blue color, like bruises and his father's rings, and Will couldn't stand to wear that color. The color of pain and grief and a man who wasn't a monster until he was.

"That's it? You want me to buy you some clothes?"

"No. I want you to purchase three things for yourself. Some are sold in sets, or you can get them bundled that way. One thing for the next three nights of the game." Beverly replied, opening the door, but Will didn't cross the threshold.

A funny thing happens when people feel as if they are paying less for something than they ought to: suddenly the worth goes down. Will had glimpsed the book so he knew it had

value- this had to be a trick of some sort.

"What the hell do you get out of this? What do you really want?" he demanded.

"I'm an artist. I don't like that your clothes have a mind of their own." Beverly said, flicking her finger at Will's still-dull attire.

"When they get emotional, or you do, they change, but anyone who open the pages of the book might not know that, or guess it. They'd just think I made a mistake, changing your clothes mid-scene. I don't like making mistakes, or people thinking I made them. I record the evidence in front of me, but it also has to be believable. Plus, those colors really make you look dreary. It's boring to draw."

Will wasn't a fan of these dull colors and the fabrics the clothes had turned into, either. And it *would* be nice to have control over what he was wearing. But since he was only staying two more nights (hopefully), there was no need for three different outfits.

"I'll do it for two." Will said.

Beverly pursed her lips slightly.

"And what, stay in the same clothes two nights in a row?" she asked.

"I'm already doing that anyway." Will pointed out.

The beta's eyes shone, though, as if she liked the fact that Will was agreeing, but also negotiating.

"Done."

Silvery notes from bells chimed as they entered the shop, Winston receiving looks, but no one chased him away. They made it all of two feet inside before encountering a hanging, jewel-encrusted sign that said: *Thieves Will Be Turned to Stone*.

Below the beautiful warning, a young woman made of granite stood frozen in place, her long curls flying out behind her as if she had been running.

"I know her. She was pretending to be pregnant last night." Will muttered, curling his lip.

"Don't worry; she'll be back to normal once Caraval is over." Beverly assured him, but Will honestly didn't care.

A piece of him did think that he should pity the omega, but it was overshadowed by the thought that Legend had a sense of justice after all, and the fact that she had tricked him and been rude absorbed any iota of sympathy. And if the sign was true, she had been trying to steal.

Beyond the granite omega, every creation in the shop glimmered with Caraval magic. Even the garish ones that looked like parrot feathers or holiday packages with too many bows.

Abigail would love it in here. Will thought.

But it seemed his enchanted clothing didn't. After Beverly tugged him into the men's section and they browsed, they would shift into something similar, as if to say, *I can do that too*.

Finally, Will settled on two 'bundles', as Beverly had called them, with the beta's encouragement. Sturdy pants, a brown shirt, a coat not unlike the one his clothes had originally shifted into it.

At Beverly's almost giddy insistence- she seemed to be enjoying this- he also chose something fancier, less practical. A light gray suit with blueish hues when it caught the light, the shirt was a dark silvery shade, a surprising contrast. It was not practical, but the material felt nice, at least, and Will didn't want to waste any more time than he had to in here.

"No returns or exchanges." the beta behind the counter said when they got there, his scent reminding Will of the bourbon his father sometimes drank with important guests.

He had longish dark hair slicked back and facial that was light but neater than Will's, his skin a bit darker, his brown eyes sharp. He made the statement without emotion, yet as Will stepped closer, he had a prickly sort of feeling that made it feel like as if the words meant he had reached the point in the game that marked no returns as well.

In front of him, a pincushion, along with an equal-arm brass scale, sat on the edge of polished mahogany counter. The scale's pan for the goods was empty but the tray of weights contained an object that looked disturbingly close to a human heart. Will had an alarming vision of his own heart being pulled from his chest and weighed against it.

The beta continued; "For those, that would be your worst fear and your greatest desire. Or, if you want, you can pay using time."

"Time?" Will asked.

"We're having a deal. Tonight it's only two days of your life per purchase." the beta said matter-of-factly.

He spoke as if he were asking for ordinary coin. But Will felt sacrificing four days of his life was no simple matter. He knew he should have been more wary of divulging his secrets, but his fear and desire had been used against him already. Really, it would cost him nothing.

"I'll take the questions." he decided.

"Great. When you're ready, take off the gloves and hold the base of the scale."

A few of the shop's other patrons pretended not to watch while Beverly looked on eagerly from the edge of the counter. Will wondered if this was what the woman had really been after. Of course, if she had really been watching Will this whole time, she should have already known the answers.

Will took off his gloves, tucking them into his pockets. The brass was oddly warm and soft under his fingers, making him hold back a gag. It was fleshy, almost as if it were a living

thing. His hands grew clammy, making the surface slick.

"Now say your greatest fear." the man prompted.

Will took a deep breath and cleared his throat. He could have said a few things, but he weighed his options. His father? His father was the person he feared the most? Abigail's predictions about his marriage? He certainly feared that, too. But...

"My greatest fear is that something terrible will happen to my sister, and I won't be able to protect her from it."

The scale creaked. Will watched in shock as the chains shifted of their own accord and the side containing the heart slowly rose while the empty pan mysteriously lowered until the two were perfectly even.

"It's always nice when that works." the man said, nodding. "Now, let go."

Will did and the scale reset, returning to an unbalanced state.

"Now grab it again and tell me your greatest desire."

Will didn't sweat this time, though this time the scale felt much more alive, too alive, for his liking. He spoke confidently.

"My greatest desire is to find my sister, Abigail."

The scale shook. Chains rattled. But the side with the heart remained firmly weighed down.

"There must be something wrong with the scale." Will said, dismayed.

"Try again. Sometimes when you have two equal or close desires, it gets confused." the beta said, frowning.

"My greatest desire is to find my younger sister, Abigail Hobbs." Will said firmly, squeezing the stem of the scale, but it made no difference.

The pans shifted for a moment, rising, bobbing, but then settled firmly back to their original state.

He squeezed even harder, thinking it with all his might, but this time it didn't even wobble.

"All I want is to find Abigail." he whispered.

"I'm really sorry, sir, but the scale never lies. I'll need another answer, or you can pay with two days of your life."

"You've been watching; you know finding Abigail is all I want." Will said, perhaps a little desperately, as he turned to Beverly.

"I know it's something you want. But there are many different things to want in life. It's not bad that there are other things you desire a little bit more."

"No." Will said, a growl rising in his throat.

He felt betrayed, and it was his own self doing the betraying.

"I would die for my sister!"

Chains rattled and the scale moved again, balancing until it was perfectly even. Unfortunately, this was not the form of payment needed.

Will ripped his hands away before he was robbed of anymore secrets.

"So, two days of your life it is." the man said.

Will felt as though he had been tricked, as well as betrayed. This must be what they had been after all alon. He thought about backing out. Giving up two days of his life left him with a feeling he couldn't find any words to describe accurately; it close to the same sensation he felt whenever he made a twisted deal with his father. But if he backed out now, it would further prove that finding his sister was not what he desired most, and he wouldn't get a glimpse in Beverly's notebook. He would have wasted all this time for nothing.

"If you take the time, how does it work?" Will asked.

The man pulled a miniature sword from his pincushion with an unnecessary flourish.

"Slice your finger with the tip of this, then squeeze thee drops of blood into the pan."

"If you want, I can cut you. Sometimes it's easier to let someone else wound you." Beverly offered looking, perhaps, a little guilty.

But Will had had enough of letting other people hurt him.

"No, I can do it." he said, running the tip of the sword over his ring finger.

Drip

drip

drip.

Only three drops of blood, yet Will felt each one, and the pain radiated beyond his finger. It was as if a hand dug sharp claws directly into his heart and squeezed.

"It is supposed to hurt?" he asked as Winston woofed.

"A little light-headedness is completely normal. You didn't expect losing to days of your life to be painless, did you?" the man asked, chuckling a little.

"I'll let you take the first one now, but the other one won't be delivered until two days from now, once your payment has been fulfilled. After that-"

"Wait. Did you just say that my debt is paid now?" Will said, feeling lightheaded now.

Oh, no. No, no, no. He hadn't asked all the questions. He had thought he had, but looking back, he hadn't. He had left out a very important one, made an assumption.

"Well, it's not going to do me any good next week, once the game is over, is it? But don't worry, I don't take full payment until the sun is up, which means you have enough time to get somewhere safe."

Somewhere safe?

"I think I made a mistake." Will said, gripping the edges of the counter.

Was it just his imagination, or had the heart on the scale begun to beat, slipping in time with his own?

"I thought... Didn't you mean two days at the end of my life? Just off my life in general? In stories..." he said, stupidly thinking of bedtime stories his dad, Louise, and his nana had told him.

"How would I know when your life is going to end?" the beta man said, chuckling again, but it was a harsh sound now.

"Don't worry, as long as nothing happens to your body, you'll come back to life on the dawn of the eighteenth just fine. It's not a big deal."

That was only two days before his wedding. Will fought against a new surge of panic. It came with a metallic, vile taste- like spoiled meat. He had only lost three drops of blood, but it felt as though he were hemorrhaging, blood and strength gushing out of him in a torrent.

"I can't die for two days- I'm *leaving* in two days."

If he died now, he'd never be able to find Abigail and make it home in time for his wedding. And what if someone else, like Mason, found him while he was dead? Hannibal had been right, and Winston's behavior... Will felt danger sparking through that thought, like embers singing his skin. And what if the game ended early because someone else got the clues and Abigail found him dead? The field of Will's vision was narrowing, pulsing black along the edges.

Beverly and the clerk exchange a look that Will didn't like. Still gripping the shiny counter, Will bared his teeth at Beverly a little.

"Is this what you-"

"No! I didn't know you wouldn't be able to answer, I swear." Beverly said.

"But I *did* answer." Will wanted to yell it, but the effects of the trade were growing stronger, dulling his senses, stealing his strength, making the world feel thicker, while he felt thinner. Powerless.

"What happens if someone harms my body?"

"You need to get back to the inn. Now." Beverly said, gripping Will's arm to steady him as he swayed.

Winston was whining and nudging him, anxious.

"No-" Will tried to protest.

Stupidly, a concern was flaring in his mind. He couldn't go back to Muskrat Inn; it was Hannibal's day to use the room. But now Will's head felt like a balloon, about to detach from his shoulders and drift away.

"You need to get him out of here, Bev." the clerk said, casting a worried look at Will. "If he dies on the street, he'll probably wake up buried underground."

Will's horror spiked, sending his sluggish heart pounding. His hearing was almost as fuzzy as his vision now, but he could have sworn it sounded as if this man wouldn't mind that happening. Something acidic, moldy, burnt, and stinkingly sweet bubbled up in Will's throat- this must have been what death tasted like.

He was barely strong enough to stand, let alone walk all the way back to the inn. When he woke up, he would have to choose between finding Abigail- or leaving to make it back to Wolf Trap in time for his wedding. He had known it might come to this, but he wasn't ready to make the choice yet. He had to find Abigail, but his wedding could very well save them both. That seemed like an impossible choice. And what would Hannibal do if he returned to the room and found his dead body?

"Will!" Beverly shook him hard. "You need to stay alive until you make it somewhere safe!"

She pushed Will toward the door, Winston glued to his side, and shoved a sugar cube into Will's mouth.

"So you'll have strength. *Do not* stop walking, no matter what."

Will's leaden legs shook as lines of sweat trickled down them. He could barely stand; he wouldn't make it back. The sugar had dissolved into rot on his tongue.

"Can't... Can't you walk with me?" he asked, suddenly scared.

"I have places I need to be. But don't worry, I'll keep my word. When someone takes days off your life, your body dies, but you mind exists in a kind of dream world. Unless you body is destroyed." Beverly promised.

Again, Will tried to ask what would happen in that case, a sick feeling in his stomach, but his words came out garbled and slurred, as if he had bitten them into pieces and was spitting

them out. He swore the whites of Beverly's eyes turned black as she said, "You'll be fine as long as you make it back to your room. I'll find you in the dream world and show you my book."

"But" -Will swayed- "I only remember my nightmares."

"This one, you'll remember." Beverly said, steadying him, thrusting another cube of sugar into his mouth. "But you must promise not to tell anyone."

She gave Will one final shove as she shoved the clothes into Will's hands.

"Now get out of here before you die."

Chapter End Notes

I keep forgetting Will has this damn ear in his pocket. :(

Also, for anyone wondering, the cider-seller was Nick Boyle, and the clerk in the shop was Zeller. The man with the goggles was someone else...

And don't worry, Winston is okay after drinking the cider. I don't know what it would have done to him, but from personal experience, if it goes on the ground, it goes in the dog's mouth.

Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

Night Two of Caraval

Chapter Notes

I know I disappeared for a while, but I was working on finishing another one of my stories so I could spend more time on this (until I inevitably start something else).

Please enjoy this chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Will would only remember one thing of his journey from the clothing shop, and it was not how his limbs felt as light as feathers, nor how his bones felt like they were turning to dust. It was not Winston judging, pushing, and pulling him, or his attempts to curl up in the boats he stubbled into. It was not how he was shoved and prodded out of said boats, or the fact he dropped the garment bag he had been given. But he would recall the alpha who picked it up and seized his arm, dragging him all the way back to Muskrat Inn with Winston whining and growling behind them.

Immediately wary floated into his head, the feeling, not the words, and that had not changed. If anything he, should he have worried more. The somewhat plain-looking face was harsh now, lines sharpened with anger, eyes glinting with something that made Will want to growl as well.

This person did not like him. He not only knew it, he could feel it in the rough way he was handled. The way Winston was snarling. The way the alpha hung onto his arm even when he tried to pull away.

"Let me go!" Will tried to yell, but his voice was feeble, and passerby who might have heard scurried by to their own destinations.

A quarter of an hour was all that remained before the sun came up and erased the magic of night.

"If I let you go, Mr. Graham, you'll just crawl into another boat. And we can't have that."

Mason dragged him through Primavera's rounded back door. Noise from the tavern was circled around them like a pack of waiting dogs. Mugs and glasses clinked against the glass tables. Snorts of amusement mixed with signs of satisfaction, and groaned tales of unsatisfaction.

Only a tall, broad man wearing goggles and a crimson cravat noticed him being dragged onto a set of stairs, where the air darkened and the noise quieted, Winston growling and giving chasing. Later Will would remember him watching, but just then his main concern was escaping Mason.

"*Let me go*. I need to get to my room." Will said, flashing his teeth, but he knew this looked utterly pathetic in his current state.

"Oh, Mr. Graham, first I think we need to talk." Mason said, cornering him in the stairwell, boxing Will in despite being shorter.

"If this is about the other day... I apologize." Will said.

It felt like it took most of his remaining strength to force out the words coherently.

"I didn't mean to trick you. I should have told the truth."

"Yes, you should have, but that isn't what this is about, Mr. Graham." Mason said, and his eyes were dangerous behind his glasses.

Winston lunged forward and seized Mason's leg in his jaws, yanking mightily, and Mason let out a shout, kicking Winston sharply until he let go. Will felt a sickening sense of dread when Winston tumbled down the steps, got up, and fled, but he didn't blame the dog.

"Then what...?" Will got out, then shook his head. "I just need to get to my room."

"I can't let you do that." Mason said, voice hardening.

In a moment of terrifying clarity, Will could see that Mason had fallen apart since he had last seen him. His eyes were lined in dark shadows, as if he had not slept in days, and his scent was choked with rage, rolling over Will oppressively. He was dirty, messy, and angry. He was dangerous.

"My sister is missing. I want her back, Will. I know your sister is missing too, and I don't think its part of the game. I feel that you know more than you are letting on." Mason said, his stinking breath washing over Will and making him want to cringe away.

No. Will couldn't be hearing this now. Abigail's disappearance was simply another magic trick. Mason was still angry at him for the first day. This was a trick to frighten him. Hadn't Hannibal said that Mason had been cruel to win the game before?

"I can't talk about this right now."

He had to get back to his room. It no longer mattered that it was Hannibal's for the night. He could not die right here. Not in front of Mason, as crazed and angry as he was. He

remembered how Mason had looked at him that first night, and he was not going to leave himself vulnerable to this alpha like this. He somehow managed to pull himself from the alpha's grasp.

"We can meet in the tavern- after we've both gotten some sleep." Will got out.

"Oh, you mean after you *die* for two days?" Mason's first thumped into the wall beside Will's head and Will flinched, his heart jerking sluggishly in his chest.

Mason reached into his pocket and pulled out that silver blade Bedelia had told Will to look for.

"I know what's happening to you. I can't lose another night, Mr. Graham! My sister is gone and-"

Smack!

Before he could finish whatever it was he was about to say, Mason flew backwards. Will didn't fully see the blow, but it was enough to knock him halfway down the stairs.

"You need to stay away from him."

The scent of musk and blood rolled over Will along with heat as Hannibal gently peeled him off the wall.

"Are you all right, Will? Did he hurt you?"

"No... I just need to get up to the room." Will whispered.

He could feel his minutes and seconds slipping away, his life draining out of him, his limbs turning into flimsy lengths of gossamer, a clock seeming to tick on the edge of what he could hear.

"Will-" Hannibal caught him as he started to fall, Winston beside him. Winston must have gone and found him. Hannibal was so much warmer than Will was. Will wanted to curl him into like a blanket, weave his arms around the alpha as firmly as he had wrapped his warms around him.

"Will, you need to talk to me." Hannibal's voice was no longer tender. "What happened to you?"

"I... I fucked up. I made a mistake." Will's words came out sticky and thick like syrup. "Someone... A girl with very shiny hair... A beta with a waffle... I needed to buy clothes and I had to pay with time."

Hannibal muttered something in a foreign language. "Please tell me they did not take a day of your life."

"No... They took two." Will said, fighting to stay standing.

For some reason he wanted to laugh, and also cry. Did he have the energy for either? Could he do both?

Hannibal's handsome face twisted, turning lethal, or maybe the whole world was twisting into something lethal. Everything spiraled sideways as Hannibal picked him up, tossing the clothing bag over his shoulder.

"This is all my fault." he muttered.

Hannibal held Will close as he carried him up the stairs, down a very wobbly hall, and into what Will assumed to be their room. All he could see was an endless darkness, save for Hannibal's face, hovering over him as he gently slid him onto he bed.

"Where were you... Earlier?" Will choked out.

"In the wrong place."

Everything was hazy at the edges, like a fog-wreathed sun, but Will could see the dark fringe of lashes around Hannibal's worried eyes.

"Does that mean-"

"Shh. Save your words, Will. I believe I can fix this, but I need you stay with me for a little longer. I am going to try to give you a day of my life." Hannibal murmured.

Will's head was muddled, so broken by whatever magic had worked its way through his body, he thought he had misheard Hannibal. Part of him wanted to giggle at the absurdity. But that look in Hannibal's eyes was back, as if he wanted Will to be his undoing.

"You would... You would really do that for me?" Will rasped.

In answer, Hannibal pressed the pad of his index finger to Will's parted lips.

Metallic, wet, and just a little sweet. Bravery, fear, and something he could not identify. Dimly, Will knew what he tasted was Hannibal's blood. But it was like no other gift he had ever received. Strangely beautiful, shockingly intimate. And Will wanted more of it. More of him.

He licked the tip of Hannibal's finger, but Will hungered, suddenly, to taste his lips as well. To feel them against his mouth and his throat, against the unblemished scent glands along his jaw, at the base of his throat, and on his wrists. He wanted to experience the solid touch of Hannibal's hands on his body. He craved the hevy weight of his chest against his, crushing them together, and wanted to find out if his heart beat just as fast as his own.

Hannibal's finger lingered a moment longer, pressing Will's lips back together, but the taste of his blood remained. And Will's desire for him intensified as the taste of his blood mingled with his unique scent. Hannibal hovered over him, and Will could hear the rhythmic beat of Hannibal's pulse against the ticking of the clock. He had been sensitive to Hannibal's presence before, but never more than this. Never more than now. Will was memorized by

Hannibal's face, the one clear thing in his vision, the red glints of his eyes, the sharpness of his cheekbones, the line of his jaw, the cool feel of the alpha's breath on his neck.

"Now I need some of your blood." Hannibal said.

His voice was so gentle, made of gentle, the same way his blood had been made of everything he was feeling.

Will had never felt so close to another person before. Not in any way. He knew that he would give Hannibal what he asked for- whatever he asked for- that he would eagerly allow him to drink a part of him the way he had the other man.

"Hannibal." he whispered, voice still weak, and scared that anything louder would destroy the moment, "why are you doing this?"

His maroon eyes, sparking red, met Will's, and something in them made his breath hitch.

"I would think the answer to that question is obvious."

He took one of Will's cold hands and held it near his curved knife, but Will imagined he was waiting for his permission. And he knew that Hannibal wasn't doing this because of the game; this felt like something entirely separate, existing only for the two of them.

Will pressed down on the tip of the blade. It was so sharp that he did not feel the pain at first. A single drop of blood welled from the wound. Carefully, Hannibal brought Will's finger to his mouth, and when his soft lip touched Will's skin, the entire world shattered into a million shards of colored glass.

Will's heart beat stronger as Hannibal's tongue gently drew his finger between his teeth, just as sharp as Will had thought they were. For a moment Will could feel Hannibal's emotions again, so close and sharp that it was like they were his own, like he was Hannibal. Awe mixed with fierce protectiveness and a thread of pain so deep, so intense that Will wanted to take the hurt from him, wanted to gasp and scream at it. His finger lipped deeper, pressing against one of his sharp canines. Days before, Will had stiffened and moved away from Hannibal's touch, but now he wished he was strong enough to wrap his arms around Hannibal, to pull him down until they were perfectly overlapped.

Not quite sure how far he had fallen already, Will imagined that loving Hannibal would be like falling in love with darkness. Not the night, not an unknown cave, but that kind of darkness that lurked in humans themselves, in predators of all kinds, frightening, consuming, but so perfectly matched to what he locked away inside himself.

Hannibal licked his finger a final time; a shiver coursed through Will so painfully cold it felt hot, like a burn. Then Hannibal was lying beside him on the bed, causing it to shift as he gathered Will close. He wanted to hold Will to his chest, but Will wanted to hold him, too, so they lay facing each other, tangled together, their foreheads resting against the others. Will pressed as close as he could, attempting to fight off death for another minute, to gather Hannibal close and hold him to his chest instead.

"You will be all right." Hannibal murmured, his hand stroking Will's hair as his vision gave out.

"Thank you." Will breathed.

Hannibal said something else, but all Will felt was his hand brush his cheek. So soft he thought he might have imagined it, along with the tender press of his lips against his cheek, right before he died, and Hannibal followed him.

Chapter End Notes

And we're back to there being only one bed. ;)

This was probably one of the more intimate things I've written, though it follows closely with the book, with Hannigram twists, of course.

There is actually no swearing in Caraval the book, but I feel like Will and co should be allowed to say bad words every now and then.

And if anyone figures out who the guy who keeps appearing is, I will lose my mind.

Polite questions and comments are always welcome, no matter how long after posting! I love having conversations about my fics.

Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

Night Two of Caraval

Chapter Notes

Again, a somewhat long gap, but I'm hoping I will find motivation to work on this soon. Please enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Death was the color purple. Purple wallpaper, purple smells. His nana's purple gown- only the young woman wearing it, and sitting in the purple chair, was definitely Abigail, not their nana.

Abigail's cheeks were full of color, her smile full of mischief, and the bruise and little cuts that had marred her face days ago had healed, leaving her looking healthier than she had in a long time. If Will's heart had been beating, it would have stopped.

"Abby, is that really you?"

"I know you are dead right now, but you really need to ask better questions. We don't have a lot of time." Abigail said, but she did offer him a smile.

Before Will could respond, his sister had opened the ancient-looking book resting in her lap, creasing the lavender, starlight gown gently. Much larger than Beverly's notebook, this book was nearly the size of a grave marker, and the color of dark fairy tales- black ice covered in tarnished gold script. It swallowed Will in its leather-bound mouth when Abigail showed it to him, spitting him out onto a chilly sidewalk.

Abigail appeared beside him, though she looked less corporal than before, transparent around the edges.

Will did not feel very solid himself; his head was fuzzy from dreaming and dying and all that came with it, but he got it working. His dad had always told him he could see things others couldn't. Beverly had said she would find him in his dreams. He had to see.

"Where can I find you?" he asked, the words rolling off his tongue like thick, sugary syrup.

"Will, telling you would be cheating. Just watch." Abigail chided, pointing.

In front of them, a purple sun fell behind a grand home, similar to the one that housed, but smaller, and painted dark plum with violet trim.

The girl inside wore a shade of purple, too. Again, it looked like his nana's purple dress. In fact, it *was* the gown, only this time the woman who wore it *was* his nana, only much younger, as pretty as she had said, her black curls setting off the lavender gown.

Her arms were wrapped around a dark hair, sturdy man who seemed to think she would look better out of the lavender gown than in it. He also looked a great deal like his grandfather, before his body had gone to fat a bit and his hair dusted with snowy white. The young man's fingers fumbled with the purple gown's intricate laces.

"Ew, I don't want to see this part." Abigail said, vanishing again with a disgusted look.

Will scrambled to look anywhere else. But everywhere he turned, he was met by the same window.

"Oh, Phyllis..." his young grandfather mumbled.

Will had never heard his nana called that name; she had always been Bella. But something about the name Phyllis rang familiar.

Then bells were ringing everywhere. Bells of mourning, in a world covered in mist and black roses.

The purple house was gone and Will stood on a new street, surrounded by people wearing black hats and even gloomier expressions.

"I knew they were full of evil. This never would have happened without that strange game of theirs." one man said from the sidelines; he didn't appear to be a mourner.

"What was the girl's name? Mischa? Was she one of them or not?" someone else asked, eyeing the procession distastefully.

"No, I don't think so." the man replied, disgust in his eyes.

Black rose petals rained down on a funeral procession, and without being told, Will knew the man was speaking of the players of Caraval. A woman had died only once during the course of Caraval's long history. The year Caraval had stopped traveling, after rumors started that Legend had murdered her.

"This dream is pretty terrible, isn't it?" Abigail said, appearing again.

This time, however, her image was ghostly sheer, and it looked like she was about to blow away.

"I've never really liked black clothes. It was so... So sad when your dad died, and Mom. When I die, will you tell everyone to wear bright colors at my funeral?"

"Abby, you aren't going to die." Will said firmly.

Abigail's image flickered like a candle in a gust of wind.

"Everyone dies, Will. You know that. But I might die sooner rather than later if you don't win this game. Legend likes to-"

Abigail vanished.

"Abigail! *Abigail!*" Will cried, but his sister seemed to be gone for good this time.

No more traces of her lavender dress or the barest hint of her honeysuckle scent. Just endless funeral gloom.

Will could feel the gray grief of the mourners press down on him as he continued to listen, hoping to learn what Abigail had been unable to tell him, as words of mourning mingled with the gossip of those who had been walking the street when the procession had come upon them.

"It's a sad story. I heard her fiancé won the game. His prize was finding her in bed with Legend."

"I heard she was the one who called off the wedding."

"No, that was after they were caught. She said she wanted to remain with Legend. He rejected her. She got too caught up in the game."

"I thought no one ever saw Legend."

"No one sees him more than once; they say he wears a different face every game. Beautiful but cruel. I heard he was there when Mischa threw herself from that window. Didn't even try to stop her."

"Monster!"

"I thought he pushed her."

"Not *physically*. Legend likes to play twisted games with people, and one of his favorites is making girls and omegas fall in love with him. Mischa jumped the day after he discarded her; I guess her parents found out and refused to take her back. Her fiancé blames himself, though. His servants say he screams her name in his sleep every night."

The three women who had been gossiping turned as a young man made his way down the street, at the very rear of the procession. A woman walked with him, holding his arm. His hair was not so messy and his expression was not one Will would have thought him capable of, but Will recognized him anyway: Mason.

The woman beside him was Margot, her eyes lowered in grief, limping slightly, escorting her brother ahead.

This must have been why he wanted to win the wish so badly, to bring his fiancée back to life.

Just then, Mason's head cocked in Will's direction. But his eyes, still with their familiar glint in them, did not land on him. They roamed the procession as if hunting. Searching through the thickening curtain of black flower petals. A soft puddle of them formed at Will's feet, several blocking Mason's eyes as he walked by. The flowers blinded him from seeing the one person whom Will was certain he had been looking for, a young man in a velvet-rimmed top hat only a few paces from where Will stood.

All the air raced from Will's lungs. In every other dream, Legend's face had not been clear, but this time she could see him perfectly. His handsome face held no emotion, his maroon eyes were void of warmth, not hint of a smile touched his lips; he was a shadow of the man Will had come to know: *Hannibal*.

Chapter End Notes

I know anyone who has actually read the book is probably especially confused right now, but I promise it will be explained in the end. :)

Polite questions and comments are always welcome; they work as fuel sometimes to get the writing done!

Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

Day Four of Caraval

Chapter Notes

I know this chapter took a bit; I was feeling a little discouraged with it ~~(I am a whore for praise and really like comments, even small ones)~~.

Please enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The world tasted like ashes and a taste Will always got in his mouth whenever he spoke a lie or realized one when he woke. Damp blankets clung to sweat-slickened skinned, wet from nightmares and visions of black roses. At least Beverly hadn't lied about remembering the dreams. Will's memories of his last moments alive were still blurry, but his dreams were vivid. They felt as solid and real as the arms encasing him.

Hannibal.

His arms were wrapped around Will, Will's arms still around him, clinging together, locked together. Will sucked in a sharp breath. Hannibal's fingers were like frost against his chest while the iced marble of his chest pressed near him, the heart inside unbeating. Will's whole body shuddered, but he didn't so much as gasp, afraid it might wake him from his deadly slumber.

Will could picture the way he had looked in his dream, wearing that top hat. That unreadable expression. Exactly the type of look he would have pictured on Legend, and Hannibal was certainly as attractive as he had always imagined the Caraval master to be.

He recalled Jimmy's frightened eyes when he had first seen Hannibal. Will had thought it was because they were Legend's guests, but what if it was because Hannibal really was Legend? He knew so much about Caraval. He had known what to do when Will had been dying. And Hannibal could easily have put those roses in the room.
A sudden heartbet pressed against Will's own.

Hannibal's heart.

Or was it Legend's heart?

No.

Will closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He had been warned about this; the game was playing tricks on him. It could not be true. He did not know how it had happened or when, but somewhere along the lines, in this strange world full of the impossible, Hannibal had begun to mean something to him. He had begun to trust him. But if the alpha really was Legend, everything that felt significant to Will had only been part of a game to Hannibal.

Hannibal's solid chest rose and fell against Will's, heat slowly returning to him. Will felt warmth wherever their bodies aligned. The tangle of their legs. Their chests pressed close. Arms around backs. All warm and getting warmer.

There was an extra warmth against Will's back, a wet cold nose nudging his ear.

Winston.

He had forgotten about the dog, had no idea what had become of him during the time he and Hannibal had been dead. Was he hungry? Thirsty? Confused? Will wanted to investigate, but Hannibal's hold was tight, and his own arm was trapped beneath the other man.

Will's breath became uneven as Hannibal drew him closer, his arm shifting, moving unconsciously to touch Will's face, and Will caught a glimpse of a blue pinprick on his finger. His cheeks flushed with warmth as he remembered the taste of Hannibal's blood on his tongue and the way his lips had felt after Hannibal had tasted his. The most intimate thing he had ever experienced or done. He needed that to be real. He wanted Hannibal to be real.

But...

This wasn't just about what he wanted. Will remembered every time Hannibal had told him that Legend knew how to take care of his guests. According to Will's dream, he did more than just *take care of them*. He had made that woman fall so madly in love, it had driven her to suicide. Will had always thought it was an accident until now. *Legend likes to play twisted games with people, and one of his favorites is making girls and omegas fall in love with him*. The words from the dream crept up like vomit in Will's throat. If Hannibal was Legend, he had been enticing Abigail before the game had even started. Perhaps he had even seduced them both.

Nausea filled Will's stomach at that awful possibility. With disturbing clarity, he called those last moments before they had died, and how he had felt he would have given Hannibal more than just his blood if he had only asked.

He needed to escape Hannibal's arms before he woke. He was trying to hold onto the hope that he wasn't Legend, but it was too much of a risk to assume otherwise. He would never throw himself out a window for anyone, but Abigail was more sensitive, more impulsive. Will had learned to temper his feelings, yet Abigail was driven by her volatile emotions, desires, and sense of adventure. Will could see how both Legend and this game could easily drive Abigail to the same unhappy ending as Mischa, if Will did not save her.

Will needed to leave and find Mason, as much as he loathed the idea. If Mischa had been his fiancée, he would be the one person who was not a Caraval player who knew whether or not Hannibal was truly Legend.

And he had said his sister had disappeared. Will's had, too. There was something more going on here.

Moving cautiously, Will eased his arm out from beneath Hannibal's body and slid the other one away, moving awkwardly, trying to carefully pry one of the alpha's arms from his body.

"Will." Hannibal murmured.

Will sucked in a gasp as the fingers on the edge of his jaw traveled down to his throat, settling on his scent glands, leaving a trail of ice and fire. He was still asleep.

But he would wake up soon.

No longer taking the time to be cautious when speed was of the essence, Will squirmed free and rolled off the bed, nudging Winston off and landing in a heap on the floor. The dog mobbed him immediately and Will pet him to calm him, noting that his clothes were well-fitted and black as mourning, but he had no time to change into his new clothes, and honestly didn't care.

As he pushed up from the ground, he judged that it had been exactly one day since he had died. It was the cusp of sunup on the seventeenth, giving him only one more night to rescue his sister before he had to leave for his wed-

Will caught sight of his reflection in the mirror and froze. He needed to shave and there were sheet creases in his cheek, but that wasn't what stopped him. His stubble now had a stark streak of silver running sharply through it. At first he thought it was a smudge on the mirror, but it was there: his fingers shook as he touched it- right down his jaw, impossible to hide unless he remained clean-shaven for the rest of his life. Will was not vain, but he suddenly wanted to shout about it.

He felt overwhelmed. The game was not supposed to be real, but it was very genuine consequences. If this was the price of some meaningless clothing, what would it cost him to get Abigail back? Would he be strong enough to give it?

Red-eyed and looking half dead, Will didn't feel particularly tough. His father had always told him he was not strong. He was an omega. The chain of fear tightened into binds around his throat as he thought of how little time he had left to do everything. But if Bedelia was right about fate, then there was no omnipotent hand determining her destiny; he needed to stop letting his worries control it. He might have felt weak, but his love for his sister was not.

An omega's strength laid in their family, the pack they formed and grew. And that was where Will would draw his strength from.

The sun had recently risen, so he couldn't leave the inn, but he could make the most of his day by searching Muskrat Inn and Primavera for Mason.

Before he stepped out of the room, Will got Winston water from the sink, noting idly that the room was still pristine and clean, that there was no sign that Winston had relieved himself anywhere. That wasn't a priority at the moment, however, so it did not stick in his mind.

Stepping out into the hall with Winston at his side, Will saw candlelight was flickering up and down the corridor, buttery and warm, but something about the space felt wrong. The scent. The scents Will had gotten used to, of many different alphas, betas, and omegas layered with sweat and fading fire smoke were mixed with harsher scents. Cloves and plums, twisted into something almost rotting.

No.

Will could only stare in panic as he watched his father step around the corner, and Winston began to growl.

Moving faster than he thought he could, he hauled Winston back into the room with him and locked the door, praying to the stars- any deity out there clearly hated him. How had his father gotten here? If he found him and Abigail now, Will had no doubt he would kill his sister in punishment.

Will wanted desperately to believe that the sight of his father was a hallucination, but it made more sense that he had figured out the kidnapping ruse. And maybe the master of Caraval had somehow sent him a hint. *Tell me who you fear the most*, the woman had said, and Will had been foolish enough to tell her.

What had he done to incur such hatred from Legend? Even if Hannibal wasn't Legend, it felt very personal now, though Will couldn't figure out why. Perhaps he had annoyed the man with all the letters he had sent? Or maybe Legend just had a sadistic sense of humor and Will was an easy victim to torment? Or-

Will's dream suddenly slammed into the front of his mind like a snowball to the face, pulsing purple, along with one name: *Phyllis*. During the vision he had been unable to make the connection, but now he remembered his nana's stories about Legend's origin. How he had been in love with a girl who had broken his heart by marrying another. His nana had always been called Bella, Bella for her beauty, because his grandfather had been sappily romantic in that way, but Will had known that wasn't her name. His grandfather had called her Phyllis in the dream. Had his nana been Legend's-

"Will?" Hannibal said, sitting up in the bed. "Why are you against the door like that?"

"I-" Will said, freezing like a deer.

Hannibal's hair framed a face with convincing concern, but all he could see was the unreadable expression he had worn as he had watched the funeral of Mischa, the poor girl who had killed herself after he had made her fall in love with him.

Legend.

Will's heart beat erratically. He told himself firmly it wasn't true. Hannibal wasn't Legend. Yet he remained rooted to the spot, back against the door, Winston at his side, as Hannibal pushed off the bed and crossed over to him, his steps surprisingly sure and even for someone who had just come back from death.

If he was truly Legend, somewhere in this magical world he had constructed was Will's sister. Will wanted to demand an answer. He wanted to smack Hannibal in the face. He wanted to bite him until he bled. But tipping his hand right now would not help. If Hannibal really was Legend, and this twisted game was all some way to get back at Will's long-dead nana for breaking his heart, the only advantage Will had was that Hannibal did not know he had discovered him.

"Will, you look dreadful. How long ago did you wake?" Hannibal asked, brow knit as he raised a hand and brushed cool knuckles across Will's cheek. "You have no idea how scared I was when I woke and-"

"I'm fine." Will said, cutting him off and stepping to the side.

He didn't want Hannibal to touch him now.

Hannibal clenched his jaw. All his earlier concern was gone, replaced with- Will wanted to think it was anger, an excuse to leave him right then and there, but it wasn't. It was hurt. He could see the sting of his rejection in shades of maroon, ghosting over his heart like mist cloaking a river.

Will had always had strong empathy. He could see through someone else's eyes as if they were his own and understand their feelings. But Hannibal's feelings were a tangled fishing line, so complex and knotted and blended together that Will had to treat it very much like he did his own some time.

He picked at it, trying to feel Hannibal's emotions, to see through his eyes, to understand what he would be feeling if he wasn't Legend. Before they had died, they had shared something extraordinary. Will remembered how gently Hannibal had carried him up to their room. How he had given up a day of his life for him. How strong and safe his arms had felt as they had hung onto each other. He could even see evidence of his sacrifice; his ash brown hair now had a streak of silver through it, part of it falling over his forehead- matching the new stripe down Will's chin. And now Will wouldn't even touch him.

"I'm sorry." Will said. "It's just- I think I might still be shaken up from what happened. If I'm acting strange, I don't mean to be. I'm not thinking clearly. I'm sorry." he said, trying for the well-behaved omega act, but he sounded strange even to his own ears.

A muscle ticked in Hannibal's jaw. He clearly didn't believe him. "Perhaps you need to lie back down, Will."

"You know I can't get back in that bed with you." Will snapped.

It was what he would have said just days ago, but the words came out bitter and harsh, not at all like he had intended.

Hannibal cleared every emotion off his face, yet Will knew his emotions were roaring inside him like a violent storm that had just broken. He was hurting badly and there was something else in there, an emotion Will was not familiar with, but everything was so different now- It was as if Hannibal's emotions were his own, as if he could actually feel them. Was it a result of the blood they had shared?

Will's lungs were tight, and so was his throat.. Every breath hurt as Hannibal strode over to the other door.

"I was not planning on joining you." he said, voice as cold as ice.

Will tried to respond, but now his vocal cords were closed and his eyes were stinging. It wasn't until Hannibal had left that he could breathe once more, and he realized it: when he left, it felt like he was shutting the door on Will as well.

000000

Will kept his body pressed close to the wall, fighting the urge to go after Hannibal, to apologize and explain. When he had walked out the door, Will would have sworn he wasn't Legend, but he couldn't risk trusting him and being wrong.

No.

He *could risk* being wrong.

Everything he had done since arriving at Caraval had involved some kind of risk. Some of those things hadn't ended well, but others had pleasantly surprised him- *like that intimate moment he had shared with Hannibal*. Hannibal never would have given him such a precious gift if Will hadn't first made the mistake of losing two days of his life.

Maybe taking a chance now was exactly what Will needed to do. If not for his own sake, for Abigail's. Hannibal had been his ally since they had arrived, and Will might need his help more than ever, especially with his father on the island.

His father! Will hadn't even told Hannibal he was here. He definitely had to find him and warn him. If his father asked around enough, someone would tell him about the charade of the engagement, that Will had been with Hannibal, and it could cost Hannibal his life.

Another thought briefly taunted him, one he couldn't ignore, but did his best to even as it slithered like a snake in his head.

If Hannibal is Legend, then he cut off Abigail's ear and made you swallow it.

He touched the ear still in his pocket, wrapped in the handkerchief, and shook his head. He couldn't think about that now.

He opened the door, Winston at his side. The wretched scent of his father still lingered, but the only person in the hall was the vile little man in the bowler hat who had stolen his watch. He paid no attention as Will darted past him with Winston and onto the stairs. He had no idea where Hannibal had gone, but he hoped he hadn't left-

Will froze on the next landing, Winston bumping into his legs.

Hannibal, as confident as if he really were the master of the Caraval, strode out of Mason's room, opened Abigail's cracked door, and stepped inside.

What is he doing?

Hannibal hated Mason. And why Abigail's destroyed room? What was-

Above, the ceiling creaked with the weight of multiple footsteps. Three sets. As they drew closer to the stairwell, Will could heard the words of one man echoing down to him. The first half of the sentence he couldn't make out, but he recognized his father's voice, and caught what came next. "You saw him walk by just now?"

A tremor ran the length of Will's body.

"Less than a minute ago, I am certain of it. Now, I believe you mentioned payment?" It must have been that horrible man who had stolen Will's watch speaking.

Suddenly, Will was back on Wolf Trap, curling into deep shadows, afraid to move lest he get caught. But he had to move. Any moment his father would be down the stairs. Will couldn't afford to be afraid, or debate what he should do. His boots barely tapped the floor as he scurried down the path Hannibal had taken into Abigail's room, Winston following like a shadow. He tried to latch the door, but the lock was broken.

The room was empty.

No sign of Hannibal anywhere.

But he had definitely been in here, as his scent lingered, and Will had seen him enter.

Will knew there had to be a reasonable explanation. And then, he remembered.

The dying garden he had found inside the Uffizi. Neglected and abandoned. The garden had been carefully cultivated as a place people would not linger- much like Abigail's room.

Will imagined Hannibal entering, pushing aside bits of wreckage, finding a floorboard marked with the symbol of Caraval, and then pressing it until another board slid open, admitting him into a hidden tunnel.

A tunnel Will needed to find.

He inhaled deeply, trying to follow Hannibal's scent, but he had not been in here long enough for that to work. Outside, the sound of footsteps grew louder, a harsh chorus to his searching. Dropping to his hands and knees, Will scanned for an entrance. Splinters and broken shards of glass dug into his skin as he crawled across the floor. Somehow the battered space still managed to smell like Abigail, sweet honeysuckle. It even covered Hannibal's far fresher scent. Moving urgently, Will searched as thoroughly as he could, because he needed to get moving before his father caught either of them.

Inside the fireplace, all the bricks were black with soot, but his eyes landed on a lighter smudge, as if someone had pressed something to it that had lifted the grime away. Underneath, the symbol etched into the firebox wall was dirty, but the tip of Will's finger prickled as he pressed the mark. For a terrifying second, nothing happened.

Then, slowly, silently, the bricks shifted apart to reveal a set of rich mahogany stairs. The sconces lining them burned with glowing orange coals, revealing a well-worn path down the center, as if they were traveled often. Will imagined Hannibal taking these steps every time he had snuck away or disappeared.

It still doesn't mean he's Legend.

But Will was finding that harder and harder to believe now. If he wasn't Legend, why else did Hannibal have so many secrets? Even if he wasn't seducing Abigail whenever he was away from Will- this thought made Will want o growl and bite the alpha's throat- Hannibal was definitely hiding something.

A damp chill wrapped around Will's exposed skin as he started downward, a low noise summoning Winston to his side. Even though he was very much awake, his head felt odd, as if there was something not quite right here. He shook his head. Two flights of smooth stairs led to three diverging pathways. On the right a trail of petal-pink sand. In the middle, one of polished glowing stones creating dim puddles of light. To the left, simple brick.

Torches tipped in white flames lit the open mouths of each option. Each route contained multiple sets of boot prints in a variety of sizes and styles. He imagined any tunnel might hide him from his father but only one would lead to Hannibal- and Abigail, if Hannibal was really Legend.

These tunnels could also lead me into madness. Will thought. But he would rather take that risk than face his father.

Closing his eyes, Will listened. To his left, the sound of wind beat against the walls. To the right, water rushed. Then, down the middle, somewhat heavy steps, a man's, someone about Will's own size. Hannibal!

Quickly, Will followed, relying on the steady press of Hannibal's footfalls to guide him, glad that the stones on the ground would quickly hide the pawprints Winston left behind. The footsteps seemed to grow louder as the temperature of the path grew colder.

Until the footsteps stopped.

Gone.

Wet chills licking at the skin of his nape, Will spun, afraid someone was behind him but it was only the silent corridor, full of stones rapidly losing their glow. Will started running faster, but his foot caught on something, and it wasn't Winston. Tripping forward, he reached out to steady himself on the damp wall, only to lose his balance once more as Winston barked and crashed into his legs.

He had tripped on a human hand.

Will stared, the scent of blood flooding over him now as he paid attention.

Five fingers with a bloody silver knife resting in the palm stretched out as if reaching for him.

Somehow, Will felt strangely calm, until he looked further, and saw the rest of it. Saw that Mason's face was gone. And saw that Hannibal was standing over what remained of the other man.

Chapter End Notes

Yay, Mason's dead! And soon we will have me attempting to write the character of Hobbs again, who we really didn't get to see much of in the show. Hope I do all right again!

And please, kind comments and polite questions are always welcomed!

Chapter 23

Chapter Summary

Day Four of Caraval

Chapter Notes

Thank you everyone for the comments! This chapter is a little later than intended, because I had to rewrite part of it (I may or may not have forgotten to go back and reread something that was a crucial element of the story😅).

But thank you all for the comments; they really helped me get back into things!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Will took a moment to absorb the hideous tableau in front of him, Winston pressed against his legs. The tunnels were driving him mad. He told himself that. The thick smell of blood was manufactured. The hand wasn't Mason's, it was someone else's, or really, not even there at all. But even if it was a figment of his imagination, there was no mistaking the weight of the hand he had tripped on, or the thick scent of blood in the air. No mistaking that the skin and flesh had been cut straight from Mason's face, exposing things that never should have seen the light of day.

Hannibal's head whipped up.

"Will, I can explain-"

Will began to run, but Hannibal's longer stride meant he caught up faster. Sprinting forward, he caught Will in a heartbeat, wrapping one strong arm around his chest and the other his waist.

"Let go of me!" Will snarled, twisting and trying to bite Hannibal.

"Will, stop! These tunnels intensify your fear- do not allow yours to consume you. I swear, there is a good explanation for this, and if you stop fighting me I can prove it. Margot Verger and I are working together." Hannibal said, adjusting his hold on Will, pinning his hands behind him.

"I've been dead for the past day. Do you really think I could have killed him in the time we have been separated?"

If he was Legend, he could have had someone else murder Mason.

"If you and Margot Verger know each other, then you must know Mason. Why pretend that you didn't know each other?" Will hissed.

"Because Margot and I were afraid of what might happen. We knew that she and Mason would be recognized from the last time they played, but I mostly watched, so my face is unfamiliar. We thought it wise to keep our partnership a secret in case Mason learned our true motives."

Hannibal's gaze flicked down the corridor toward Mason's body, no emotion on his face. Just the same cold look he had worn at the funeral. *Legend*.

Will smothered a growl, and though every single one of his instincts battled again it, he forced his body to go limp. Not to scream as he felt Hannibal press against him. Not to hit as his wrists were slowly released. The only thing Will fought was his growing fear, until Hannibal removed his arm from around his waist.

And then Will-

Hannibal pressed him up against the wall, a few short feet after his attempt to run.

"You are going to get us both killed if you do not stop this, William." Hannibal growled.

Then he ripped open the buttons of his shirt. They skittered across the ground as he arched away and stepped back, just enough for the torchlight to reveal what Will had thought was a scar above his heart. But it wasn't. Faint, a tattoo in the palest purple and white inks curled near the top of his ribs. *A rose*.

"It's a different color, but I can assure you, Miss Verger has the same one. She was so covered you likely never saw it." Hannibal said.

"That doesn't prove anything. Roses are all over Caraval." Will snorted.

Legend was obsessed with them. Further proof that the dream sent by Beverly had been right. A small part of Will warned that it wasn't wise to reveal his last card to the player holding all the others. But he was done with playing games. A few feet away lay the body of a dead man; this had gone too far.

"You can stop lying to me. I saw you at the funeral, *Legend*." he hissed.

Hannibal's dark expression froze. For a moment he looked stunned. Then his features changed.

"I don't know what you think you say, Will, but I have only ever attended a handful of funerals. One for my uncle and one for my sister. If you did what I think you did... You saw the funeral of my sister Mischa: Mason's former fiancée. I'm here because I want to stop other people from being destroyed as he destroyed her."

Mischa was his *sister?* Will's conviction wavered. But had he begun to believe Hannibal because he desperately wanted to, or because Hannibal was really telling the truth? He tried to slip into Hannibal's mind, to know what he was thinking, to see through his eyes, but there was nothing. That connection between them must have faded.

"I saw the pictures. If she was your sister, why were you just standing there? I saw you wearing a top hat." Will asked.

"You believe I am Legend because you saw a few drawings and I wore the proper attire to my sister's funeral?" Hannibal sounded as if he wanted to laugh.

"It wasn't just the hat!" Though that might have been most of it. But there were still other things Hannibal wasn't telling him. "How did you know what to do when I was dying?"

"Because I learned what to do when I watched the game before. It's not any sort of secret, but most people aren't willing to give up their lives for someone else, even a small piece of it." He gave Will a pointed look. "I know that you have problems with trust." he went on roughly. "After meeting your father, I can not blame you for that. I swear that all I have learned of the game comes from playing it before, Will."

"Is that how you got back Muskratt Inn the other day after you'd been hurt? And why didn't you meet me in Primavera like you said you would?" Will challenged.

Hannibal let out a sigh of frustration.

"I don't know how this will prove anything to you, but I did not meet you in the tavern because the night before I had been bashed in the head. I slept longer than I intended, and by the time I got there, you had already left." he said, smirking, but something about it was off.

Too forced.

Even if Hannibal wasn't Legend, he still wasn't being entirely honest. His hands were clenched ever so slightly, holding onto his secrets like Will so often clutched his fear, as if letting go would unravel him.

"If you're really here to stop Legend and Mason, I can't imagine you'd just sleep in. And it still doesn't explain how you got back in the inn during the day." Will said, leaning back against the wall, forgetting his fear.

"Why are you so obsessed with that?" A frustrated sake of his head, frustration woven into his scent. "All right. If you really must know the truth, you may have it." Hannibal leaned in close, until his cool breath washed over Will's skin, his scent weaving around him, and the tunnel seemed to be made of nothing but Hannibal.

"I did not sleep at all. I left you sitting in Primavera on purpose. After being in the room with you the day before, I did not think it was a good idea for me to see you again." Hannibal said, his eyes dropping to Will's lips, and Will shivered.

In the dim tunnels it was too dark to make out their color, but when Hannibal looked back up, he pictured two pools of wine fringed by dark lashes. It was the exact opposite of the same way Hannibal had stared at him before, when his back had been against the door and Will had been pressed against him.

"I began this game with a simple mission." Hannibal paused, swallowing thickly, and when he spoke again his voice was rough and low. "I came here to find Mason Verger, to track down the Caraval players involved, and get avenge Mischa. It was Mason who destroyed her, but others helped along the way. I believe you pieced together what sort of man he is. Margot was in need of assistance, and we both knew Mason would be unable to resist another chance to win Caraval. She was very dear to my sister, and no one should suffer at the hand of Mason Verger."

He took a deep breath.

"I wanted to help my sister's friend, and get revenge the alpha who hurt them both. The game brought out the worst in Mason, and Mischa paid the price of it. My relationship with you was meant to end right after you got me inside Caraval. So yes, I have not been completely honest with you, but I swear, I have no ill intentions toward you."

Will imagined he could have crumbled the stone around with the force of his words. Hannibal always seemed to be covering up how he truly felt, but those last few words had stripped him bare. His tone may not have been sweet, but Will heard nothing but the truth. In his experience, sweet often covered bitter.

Taking an intentional step back, Hannibal slowly reached into his jacket pocket and lifted out a note. "I found this in Mason's room. I came down here to meet with him, exact my revenge, but when I got down here, he was like this."

H-
Margot is missing. If you know what's good for you and that omega whore of yours, you'll come talk to me. You know where.

Will envisioned the frightened omega with Mason, who had looked at him in what he now understood to be warning. She had been trying to protect him.

He recalled the last time he had seen Mason alive. He had been furious in the stairwell, roaring that his sister was missing.

"You... You made Margot disappear." he said to Hannibal.

"Yes. Mason has abused her her entire life. I lost contact for a time after Mischa's death, and I was unable to break her free from her brother's power. As you can see, Mason threatened you, and that and my revenge was enough to bring me here. Players disappear during Caraval, I am sure you know that. The island hates the rude, those who break the rules. It

wouldn't have taken much to convince him that she had broken a rule and disappeared." Hannibal said with a nod.

He proceeded to explain that these tunnels ran under everything. Maps were embedded in the mouth of each one, and they were mainly used by the Caraval performers, to easily get from one place to another.

"And sometimes they are used for murder. Which, admittedly, was my intention. The world would not suffer for the loss of Mason Verger." he added, his expression... Will could see he very much wished that he done what had happened to Mason.

"I tried to get revenge on Mason once before. I know you saw the brand on my back. I failed, and that was my reward." Hannibal said, his voice bitter.

He looked... Shattered. Like the mentions of his sister, and the suffering Margot had endured because he had been unable to help, had broken bits inside of him.

Will wished he knew how to fix him, but it seemed as if he was almost as damaged as he was. "You said Caraval players had a hand in what happened to Mischa. Do you still want revenge?" he asked.

"Would you stop me if I did?" Hannibal asked, glancing at Mason's skinned and broken body.

Will felt as if his answer should have been yes. He liked to believe there were always options other than violence. But Hannibal's story, the kind of person Mason had turned out to be, and what was happening now broke any illusion that Caraval was just a game.

Will had thought his father was vicious, but Legend, Mason, they were just as much a monster as Garret Jacob Hobbs. It seemed his nana hadn't lied when she had said that the more Legend played the role of the villain, the more he became one in reality. Hannibal had indicated that Legend had helped destroy his sister, that some of those rumors were true. There was a monster in the man.

And Will knew if he did not find Abigail, if she died, if she was truly hurt, he would go to the lengths Hannibal was going to and beyond to avenge his sister.

Cautiously, he reached out and took Hannibal's hand. His fingers were tense, cold. "I'm sorry about your-"

The echo of footsteps silenced him. Steady, determined, close. He didn't hear a voice, but he swore he recognized the gait. He caught the scent of cloves and plums, and a scent he didn't recognize, something that made him think of copper and smoke. Instinctively, he pulled his hand back. "I think that's my father!"

Hannibal's head jerked toward the sound. In a flash his sorrow was gone. "Your *father* is here?"

"Yes." Will said.

With Winston on their heels, they both started running.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you enjoyed it and that it made sense. I had to try SO hard not to give something away and that might have made a few things seem like they were phrased a little weirdly, along with not editing correctly after rewriting. If there's a mistake or you have a question, just let me know!

Polite comments and questions are always welcomed!

Chapter 24

Chapter Summary

Day Four of Caraval

Chapter Notes

I know this chapter took a long time, but I've just been feeling off with my writing and working on another fic and art for that, so this came kind of late. But the next chapter is already written, so I'll be posting it three days from now.

And PLEASE, please feel free to comment. It's encouragement! I want to get this bitch done.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"This way." Hannibal tugged him toward a corridor lined in bricks and lit with glowing spiderwebs.

"No." Will said, pushing him left. "I came down a path with stones." He didn't recall the walls being speckled with radiant rocks as well, but he had not been paying full attention before.

Behind them the crush of boots was getting louder.

Hannibal scowled but slightly followed him. His elbow brushed against Will's as the tunnel wells grew narrow and knobby stones dug into both their sides, Winston bumping into their legs. "Why didn't you tell me your father was here?"

"I was going to tell you, but-"

Hannibal's hand slammed over his mouth, salt, dirt, and blood pressed as his lips as he whispered. "Shh-"

He grabbed hold of one of the glowing stones dotting the walls, twisted it like it was a doorknob, and pulled Will into a darkened nowhere, Winston crashing after them. The walls hugged Will's back like an icy embrace, moist and cold. He could feel them soaking through his clothes as he tried to remember how to breathe.

Plums and gloves were replacing Hannibal's scent of blood and musk, moving like coils of smoke beneath the strange door they had just gone through. Will became terrified that their scents would smell just as potent to his father.

"I will keep you safe." Hannibal whispered.

His body pressed close to Will's, as if to shield him, while boot steps landed hard just outside their hiding spot, which seemed to be growing increasingly smaller. The icy walls were digging into Will, pushing him closer and closer to Hannibal. His elbows hit his chest, forcing him to wrap his arms around the alpha's waist as his taut body molded against his.

Will's heart raced at an irregular pace. The coarse stubble on Hannibal's jaw grazed his cheek as his hands wove low around his hips. Through the thinning material of his clothes, Will could feel every curve of Hannibal's fingers. If his father opened the door and discovered them like this, he was dead. Hannibal as well.

Will tried to push away, his breath coming quick and fast, head getting light. The ceiling now seemed to be sinking too, moving closer, dripping cold moisture on top of his head.

"I think the room is trying to kill us." Will breathed.

Outside, he heard his father's footsteps retreat, until the sound of them faded to nothing. Will would have liked to stay here for another minute or two, hidden safely away, but his lungs were being squashed, sandwiched between Hannibal and the freezing wall, Winston crushed against his knees.

"Open the door!" he gasped.

"I assure you, I am trying." Hannibal grunted.

Will sucked in a gasp. His shirt rode up above his navel as Hannibal's hands roamed over his backside, his palms searching for their exit.

"I can't find it. I think it's on your side." he ground out.

"I can't feel anything." *Except for you*. Will's fingers brushed places he knew he shouldn't have been touching, while his hands tried to explore the wall. But the harder he fought, the more the room seemed to push back.

Like the ocean off the island.

The more Will had kicked against it, the more worried and scared he had become, the more the waters had fought against him.

Maybe that was it.

Hannibal said the tunnels heightened fear, but maybe they fed off it as well.

"The room is connected to our emotions. I think we need to relax." Will said, taking a deep breath.

Hannibal made an odd, strangled sound.

"That is not easy at the moment."

His lips were in Will's hair, and his hands were just below his hips, clinging to him.

"Oh." Will said.

His pulse kicked up again, and as it did, he could feel Hannibal's heart rushing against his chest. A week ago, he never could have relaxed in this situation; even now it was admittedly difficult. But despite his lies, somehow he knew he was safe with Hannibal. He would never harm him in any way. Will forced himself to take a calming breath, and as he did the wall stopped moving.

Another breath.

The room grew just a little bigger.

Outside there were still no sounds or scent of his father. No footsteps, no breathing. None of his noxious scent.

A moment later the walls against Will's back were warmer, a welcome contrast to his damp clothing. As the room expanded, he could feel Hannibal relax as well. Most of Will's body still touched his, but not as close as before. His chest mothed in time with his, slow and even as the wall continued to move back.

With every breath they took, the chamber became warmer. Son there were tiny pinpricks of light, dotting the ceiling like starlight and illuminating a glowing knob right above Will's right hand.

"Wait-" Hannibal warned.

But Will had already turned the knob. The minute he did, the room disappeared. Before and behind them, a low passageway stretched out, embedded with broke seashells that glowed like the stones had, the ground covered by a trail of petal-pink sand.

Hannibal cursed in a foreign language. "I hate this tunnel."

"At least we escaped my father." Will said, trying to look on the bright side.

No footsteps sounded in any direction. All Will could hear were crisp ocean waves colliding in the distance, a sound that made him think of Wolf Trap. Wolf Trap didn't have pink sand, but the echoing push and pull made him think of home, along with something else.

"How did you know I could get you into the game?" Will asked slowly. "I didn't receive the tickets until after you arrived on Wolf Trap."

Hannibal kicked up more sand with his boots as he walked a little faster for just a few seconds.

"Don't you think it is strange you do not even know the name of the man you're marrying?"

"You're changing the subject." Will growled.

"No, this is part of your answer."

"All right." Will said, lowering his voice.

He still didn't detect footsteps, still didn't smell any fresh scents, but he wanted to be safe. "It's a secret because my father is controlling."

Hannibal toyed with the chain of his pocket watch. "What if there was more to it?"

"What are you saying?"

"I believe your father may have been trying to protect you. Before you get upset, please hear me out." Hannibal said, speaking faster. "I am not saying your father is good. From what I have seen, your and Abigail's assessment is correct, his is loving until the moment he isn't. No parent should be like that. But, that being said, I can understand his reasons to be secretive."

"Go on." Will said tightly.

Hannibal explained what Will already knew, about Legend and his nana Phyllis. Though Hannibal's version of the story was different from his nana's. In Hannibal's version, Legend started with far more talent and innocence. All he cared about was Bella. She was the reason he had become Legend; it has nothing to do with a desire for fame. Then before his first performance, he found her in the arms of a different man, who she had planned to marry all along.

"After that, Legend went a little mad. He vowed to destroy Phyllis, by hurting her family the way she had wounded him. Since Phyllis crushed his heart, Legend swore he would do the same to any omegas, daughters, or granddaughters, unfortunate enough to be part of her line. He would ruin their chances at having happy marriages or finding love, and if they went mad in the process, even better."

Hannibal clearly tried to say the last part as if were not incredibly serious, but Will could still vividly remember his dream. Legend didn't just make women and omegas fall in love, he drove them mad with it, and he had no doubts that the man was doing the same thing to Abigail right now.

"So, when my friends and I learned of your engagement," Hannibal went on, "we knew it was only a matter of time before Legend invited you to Caraval so he could break it off."

Again, he made it sound so much less harmful than it was. But Will's engagement was his entire future. Without this marriage, he would be doomed to a life on Wolf Trap with his father, and Abigail would be trapped as well.

As the sandy path grew steeper, Will put more effort into walking, thinking back to the foolish letters he had sent. He had signed his name 'Will Graham' but never his full *legal* name, William Hobbs-Graham, but he was a Graham. His nana's maiden name kept by his dad, and the Isle of Wolf Trap... He had been so foolish. It might have taken Legend some

time to figure it out, but if he had done some digging, it probably wouldn't have been hard, especially when he had been keeping an eye on Bella's line.

Will could see Hannibal's story making sense, but he wondered how a simple sailor could have possibly known all this. He narrowed his eyes at the lean alpha beside him, and asked the question that had visited his thoughts on more than one occasion.

"Who are you really?"

"Let us just say my family is well connected." Hannibal said, flashing a smile that might have looked charming to some, yet Will could see there was nothing remotely happy about it.

He recalled the gossip he had overheard in his dreams. Hannibal's family had turned his sister away after learning of her illicit relationship with Legend. From what Will knew of Hannibal he couldn't imagine him being so judgmental, but he must have felt the guilt all the same. It was an emotion Will was far too familiar with.

For several beats they walked in silence, until Will finally found words that didn't sound too bad to say, "It's not your fault, you know, what happened to your sister."

For a fragile moment, as thin and delicate as a piece of spider silk, there was only the waves in the distance, and the crush of their boots in the sand. Then: "So you do not blame yourself when your father beats your sister?" His words were whispered, but Will felt each one acutely, reminding him starkly of every time he had ever failed Abigail.

Hannibal stopped walking and turned around slowly to face him. His steady gaze was even softer than his voice had been. It reached out to the broken parts of Will like a caress. The type of touch that moves through damaged flesh, past broken bones and bleeding wounds and into a person's injured soul. Will could have been wearing clothing that covered every inch of his skin and he would have still felt stripped bare beneath Hannibal's gaze. It was as if all his shame, his guilt, the awful secret memories he tried to bury, were laid bare for Hannibal to see in that moment.

"You father is the one to blame." Hannibal said. "You've done nothing wrong."

"You can't possibly know that." Will argued. "Whenever my father hurts Abigail, he does it because I have done something wrong. Your lie in the barrel room should have proved that to you. It's always because I failed-"

"Help!" A scream tore through the rest of Will's room like a knife slicing through cloth, sharp and quick. "Please!" A familiar shriek followed.

"Abby?" Will cried, starting to run, kicking up a flurry of pink sand.

"No! That is not your sister." Hannibal warned.

But Will ignored him. He knew his sister's voice. It sounded only a few feet away; he could feel it vibrating the air. Louder and louder, it echoed off the sandstone walls until-

"Will, stop!"

Hannibal's arm snapped around his waist, hauling him back as the path abruptly ended. A few unfortunate grains of sand scattered off the edge, falling into foamy blue-and-green waters churning more than fifty feet below.

Any air that remained in Will's lungs left them.

Hannibal's cheeks were flushed with color, hands shaking as he kept a steady grip on Will. "Are you all-"

The end of his sentence was cut off by evil laughter. A sour sound only found in nightmares and made by foul people. It poured out of the walls as if the stones were dotted with tiny mouths.

Another trick of these fucking tunnels.

"Will, we need to keep moving." Hannibal said, gently touching his hip.

He guided Will back to a safer path, Winston whining, while the tunnels continued to laugh; a twisted version of his sister's voice.

For a moment Will had felt so close to finding Abigail. But what if he was already too late to save his sister? What if Abigail had fallen madly in love with Legend, giving herself to him so completely, that once the game was over, she would want to end her life as well? Abigail loved danger and adventure the same way candlewicks loved to burn. It never seemed to scare her that some of the things she lusted for might consume her like a wolf devouring meat.

As a boy, Will had been drawn to the idea of Legend's magic. But Abigail had always wanted to hear about master of Caraval's darker side. A part of Will couldn't deny there was something seductive about that side of him. Something poetic and magical about winning the heart of someone who had vowed never to love again.

But Legend wasn't just jaded; he was demented, adept at making people fall not only in love but straight into madness. Who knew what sort of twisted things he was leading Abigail to believe? If Hannibal hadn't stopped Will just now, he might have run straight off that cliff and crashed to his own death before he had even realized his mistake. And Abigail leapt forward without thinking far more than Will ever did.

Abigail had been only twelve the first time she had tried to run off with an alpha. Thankfully, Will had found the pair before their father had learned anything, but ever since Will had come to fear the day his sister would run into trouble he could not rescue him from.

Why couldn't it be enough for Legend just to ruin Will's engagement?

"We will find her. What happened to Mischa won't happen to your sister." Hannibal said, tone firm.

Will wanted more than anything to believe him. After everything that had just occurred, he ached to break down and fold himself into Hannibal, to blur the lines between them, to trust

him again like before. But the words e meant as reassuring forced to the surface a question Will had been too afraid to think about since he had made his earlier confession as to why he was here.

He pulled away from Hannibal, separating their hands, forcing himself to create distance (and nearly tripped on Winston in the process).

"Did you know when you brought us to Caraval that Legend would take Abigail the way he took Mischa?" he demanded.

Hannibal hesitated. "I knew there was a chance."

In other words, *yes*.

"How much of a chance?" Will growled.

Hannibal's wine-colored eyes filled with something like regret, but not quite. "I never said I was a good person, William."

"I don't believe that." Will countered.

His thoughts raced back to Bedelia, the fortune-teller, how she had told him a person's future could shift based on what they wanted most. "I believe you could be good if you really wanted to be."

"You only believe that because you are good yourself, Will. Decent people like to believe there might be good in someone, but there is not much of it in me." Hannibal cut himself off, something flashing across his face. "I knew what would happen when I brought you and Abigial here. I didn't know which, but I knew Legend would take one of you."

Chapter End Notes

Hannibal gave me such a hard time in this chapter. I kept forgetting about Winston, which was he was (quite literally) wedged in there at some points. Sort of wish Will could just recall him to Pokeball and get him out the way for a bit, or at least give me a viable excuse of where he is I forget him. :)

Polite questions and comments are always welcome! (Let me know if the story is flowing right; I can't shake the feeling I forgot something)

Chapter 25

Chapter Summary

Day Four of Caraval

Chapter Notes

Okay, here. We. GO! I've got one (I think) more chapter written out, to be posted on the sixth, probably, but then things will slow down just a little because I'm writing a Halloween fic.

Thanks for the comments, guys! I really appreciate tem!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Will"s legs were felt boneless, thin skin wrapped around useless muscle. His lungs ached from the pressure of something, but whether it was a howl of rage or even unshed tears, he didn't know. Even his clothes had had enough. They shifted into drab shades of black and gray. Will didn't remember ripping his coat, but the hem hung in odd tatters around his knees. He didn't know if the magic had stopped working or if was just reflecting how exhausted and unraveled he felt. He had left Hannibal at the base of the mahogany stairs, snapping at him not to follow.

When he returned to their room with its roaring fire and massive bed, all he wanted to do was lose himself under the covers and wake up, wake up and find this had all been some terrible nightmare. Or at least tumble into the oblivion of sleep to escape what was almost certainly reality. But he couldn't afford to do that.

When he had first arrived on the isle, he had only been concerned about making it home before his wedding. But now that Legend (presumably) had killed Mason and his father was here, the game had changed. Will felt the press of time, heavier than the crush of all the blood-colored beads in the Palazzo delgi Uffitzi's hourglasses; he had to find Abigail before their father found her, or Legend consumed her in ravenous bites, swallowing her completely. If Will failed, Abigail would die.

In less than two hours, the sun would set, and Will would need to be ready to start searching again.

So, he gave himself one minute. One minute to try to feel some horror for whatever had happened to Mason, but after what had Hannibal had told him, he only felt pity for Margot

Verger. One minute to cry softly for his sister. One minute to rage at Hannibal because he was not who he had thought he was, and he had been so foolish. He wanted to scream, cry, howl, snarl, and moan over all the things that had churned beyond his control, at his stupidity, at everything he could not change. He picked Legend's stupid vase of roses and hurled them against the mantel of the fireplace with all the strength in his body.

"Will- are you all right in there?" Hannibal knocked and burst through the door at the same time in an odd mixture of manners and rudeness.

"What are you doing in here?" Will snarled, fighting back the burn of tears.

He did not want Hannibal to see him cry- he was done with crying- though he was fairly certain it was too late for that.

Hannibal was silent for a long moment as he looked around for a threat that wasn't there, clearly distressed to find Will raging and crying and no danger to go with it. Will's scent was thick with sadness, anger, and distress, a powerful cocktail to hit an alpha who cared about you with.

"I thought... I thought I heard something."

"I broke the fucking vase, that's what you heard. What else did you think it could be? Get out! You can't just burst in here like that! Go! I'm- I'm going to change." Will raged, snatching up the clothes that had cost him a day of his life.

A silly excuse and he didn't even care that he was dirty, but he just wanted Hannibal to leave him alone. Winston looked between them, as if unsure whether or not he should follow Will's lead.

Instead of leaving, Hannibal shut the door. His eyes took in the shattered case, the scattered roses, and the puddle on the floor before they returned to Will's face. "Please, don't cry because of me."

"You're just full of yourself, aren't you, you bastard? My sister is missing, my father is here, and Legend has taken to murdering players. These tears are not for you."

Hannibal had the decency to look ashamed. But he stayed in the room. He sat gingerly on the bed, making the mattress dip beneath his weight as the tears began to spill over. Hot and wet and salty, Will's childish outburst had purged some of his pain, but now the tears wouldn't stop despite his best efforts, and maybe Hannibal was right: maybe a few *were* because of him.

Hannibal leaned close and brushed them away with gentle sweeps of his fingertips.

"Don't." Will snapped, smacking his hand away.

"I deserve that." Hannibal dropped his hand and slid farther away, until they were on opposite ends of the bed. Winston leapt between them, as if he were some sort of barrier.

"I should have told you the truth, and I should not have brought you here against your will."

"You shouldn't have brought either of us here at all." Will snapped.

"Abigail would have found a way, with or without me. She is a resourceful girl."

"Is this supposed to be an apology? If it is, you better try harder, Mr. Lecter."

Hannibal's voice was cautious when he spoke. "I'm not sorry for doing what your sister wanted: I believe people should have the freedom to make their own decisions. But I *do* regret every time I have lied to you, and I owe you an apology." He paused, and when he looked at Will his eyes were soft again, even softer than they had been in the tunnels not long ago. They were open too, in a strange way, as if he wanted Will to see something he usually kept hidden behind high walls.

"I am aware that I do not deserve another chance, but earlier you said you believe I can be good. I am not, Will, or at least I haven't been in very long time. I am a liar and I want revenge, and sometimes I make terrible choices. I come from a prideful family that was always playing games with one another, and after Mischa-" he hesitated, his voice taking on a rough, strangled, hard-to-speak edge that came whenever he spoke of his sister- "after she died, I lost faith in everything. Not that it is an excuse. But if you allow me another chance, I swear I will make it up to you."

Across from them the fire crackled, its heat shrinking the puddle that lay in front of it. Soon it would just be roses and glass Will should really pick up before Winston stepped on it. He thought of Hannibal's purple rose tattoo. He wished he really was just a sailor who had happened by his isle, and he hated that Hannibal had lied to him for so long. But he could understand devotion to a sister. He could understand wanting blood-soaked revenge if something terrible happened to the one you loved. Will knew what it was like to love someone so irrevocably, no matter what the cost.

Hannibal leaned against the bedpost, all kinds of tragic and lovely, his light brown hair hanging in front his tired eyes, his wicked mouth turned down at the corners, and rips marring his once-pristine clothing.

Will had made mistakes because of this game as well. But Hannibal had never held those against him, and he knew he shouldn't punish the alpha for making his own.

"I forgive you." he said. "But don't lie to me again."

With a heavy breath, Hannibal closed his eyes, brow knit into a look somewhere between pain and gratitude. He spoke hoarsely, "I will not tell you another lie."

"Hello?" A knock on the door startled them both and made Winston's head go up, a bark escaping him.

Hannibal leapt to his feet before Will could move. *Hide*, he mouthed.

No. He had done enough hiding for one day. Ignoring his angry look, Will grabbed the fireplace poker and followed him as he crept to the door. Winston had made it pointless to pretend there was no one here.

"I have a delivery." a feminine voice called.

"For whom?" Hannibal asked.

"It's for the brother of Abigail Hobbs."

Will gripped the poker tighter, his lips peeling back in a silent snarl.

Tell her to leave it at the door. he mouthed. He wanted to hope it was a clue. But all he kept thinking of was Mason's missing face. With a shudder, he imagined Legend slicing off his sister's skin and delivering it to his room, just like her ear.

After the messenger girl's footsteps had faded, he let Hannibal open the door.

The box on the other side was flat black, the color of failure and funerals and the darkest hours of the night. It stretched in front of the doorway, long, and almost as wide as Will was. Next to it rested a vase with two red roses.

More flowers.

Will kicked over the case with a vicious sweep of his foot, spilling the flowers across the threshold of the room before pulling the box inside. He couldn't tell if it felt heavy or light. Part of him was tempted to beat it with the poker just in case.

"Shall I open it?" Hannibal offered, seeing the look on his face.

Will shook his head. He didn't want to open the black box either, but every second he wasted was a second they could be using to search for Abigail. And if this was a clue somehow earned, they had to look. He carefully lifted the lid after snaking off an equally flat, black ribbon.

"What is it?" Hannibal asked, brow drawn again.

"The rest of the clothes I ordered from the shop." Will said, letting out a relieved laugh as he dressed aside the rest of the paper and pulled them free. The man had said it would be delivered in two days.

But something about the clothes was wrong. It looked different from how Will remembered it. The color of every piece was much lighter, the light gray of the suit incredibly pale, almost white- wedding-clothes white.

Chapter End Notes

I hated writing Hannibal in this chapter. So, sorry if he seems a little out of character. Them actually sitting down and TALKING is something of a new concept for this couple, obviously. :)

Hope you enjoyed!

Chapter 26

Chapter Summary

Day Four of Caraval

Chapter Notes

I actually thought a different chapter was up next, so, uh, take this one instead because it comes before. Screwing with my mind right now. This one is rather short, and hopefully the next one will be posted on the ninth of this month. Enjoy!

Thanks to everyone who's left comments! And special thanks to Devsem for pointing out the typos here and there. It's really appreciated.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It seemed to mock him. It was far fancier than what Will had chosen, more like the stereotype of male omega wedding clothes. The material was lighter, thinner, richer than what he had chosen. The shirt cut differently, the neckline buttoning to a point that showed far more skin than Will ever had. He didn't try it on, but he could also tell that it was much more close fitting than what he had chosen- it would be almost scandalous compared to anything he had ever worn.

The creamy buttons on the shirt and jacket gleamed like polished ivory in the room's warm light. At the bottom of the box Will found a small note, attached with a broken pin. "This must have fallen off."

On one side was the image of a top hat, on the other a brief message.

I am imagine this will look lovely on you.

Warm regards,

The actual signature was some sort of figure Will could not figure out, but if he had to guess, it was someone's attempt at a fancy, looping A. Either that or it was a fancy D. But he couldn't tell.

Hannibal peered at it.

"Who is 'D'?" he asked.

"I think that's an A. And someone probably wants be to believe it's from Abigail." Will said.

But he knew this gift was not from his sister. The mockery of wedding attire could only be from one person, and the top hat on the note could only mean one thing. *Legend*.

Invisible claws dragged over his skin, such a different feeling than what Legend's first letter had invoked. "I think this is the fifth clue."

"Why do you think that?" Hannibal asked with a grimace.

"What else could it be?" Will asked. He pulled out his note with all the clues.

This is your first clue on the road to find her.

The others will not be so easy to retrieve.

Some will make you question your sanity

And all that you believe.

~~*Clue number two you'll discover at the scene of her departure*~~*. Picture card of Palazzo degli Uffitzi*

~~*Number three you must earn*~~*. Follow the man with the heart of black and blade of silver? = Cider*

~~*Number four will cost you something valuable*~~*.*
2 days of life for Bev's dream

And number five requires a leap of faith.

Most of you will fail.

But one will surely succeed.

You have ~~five nights~~ two nights to find the

Remaining clues and then the girl,

And Legend's wish will be yours.

"See, I've already figured out the first four clues." Will said, showing it to the alpha. "All that's left is the fifth."

"Will, please explain how this is the fifth clue." Hannibal said, still looking at the clothes as if they were covered in something far more offensive than buttons.

That's when Will unpuzzled it. Buttons and a top hat were both symbols.

"Everyone knows Legend is partial to top hats. I've been finding buttons all over the game." he said. "I didn't know if the buttons meant anything, but I collected them all the same. But

after *this*, they must. When I bought these, there was a shop next door with a path of buttons leading to a hatter. The shop was shaped like a hat."

"I still don't see how that could mean anything." Hannibal said, a frown stuck in place as he read Will's notes on the page. "And clue number five requires a leap of faith. How does a hatter fit in with that?"

"I don't know. But a leap of faith if following something more than evidence. It's trying something unlikely. It's worth checking out, at least, and I have no other ideas." Will said with a shrug.

He wasn't fully convinced of this. Something felt... Off. He couldn't really see where these buttons would lead. But he had to take a leap of faith, and discarding the evidence he could see and focusing a small, tiny detail was a leap of faith. He had also learn through the whole course of this wretched game that logic had little place in it. Every time he tried to come with a reasonable explanation, there were always variables he had been unable to see until he looked just right. Sometimes caution could hold you back instead of keep you safe.

But it seemed as thought Hannibal was starting to feel the opposite. He had a look on his face that suggested he wanted nothing more than to toss Will over his shoulder and keep him locked away and hidden for the rest of the game.

"The sun will be down soon." Will said firmly.

"If you can come up with something better before then, I am more than willing to follow that lead. If not, the minute the sun is down, I think we should at least try this one. Even if it isn't right, we might find something along the way."

Hannibal glanced at the clothes once again, his mouth opening as if he wanted to say something, but he closed it and nodded.

"I will check the halls to see if your father is anywhere near before we leave."

After he left, Will reluctantly changed into the clothes (they must have been something. Why else would they be so altered?). They were not as bad as he had thought they would be, but they did not feel right, something someone else had clearly picked out for him. He grabbed the buttons he had picked up. They felt like something flimsy, something not worth paying attention, but maybe he just hadn't seen where they could lead yet.

Chapter End Notes

I really hope I didn't give anything away. I wanted to reveal it in the next chapter, but I had an ~issue~ with something in the original book that I couldn't for the life of my figure out how to change.

Polite questions and comments are always welcome!

Chapter 27

Chapter Summary

Night Four of Caraval

Chapter Notes

Sorry that this was posted late; I forgot today was the ninth!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

As they slipped out of the inn, Will didn't even smell a hint of his father's scent. Right before they had stepped outside, Hannibal had sworn to him he had seen Garret Jacob Hobbs leave the building. But Will kept looking over his shoulder and scenting the air cautiously, wondering if his father was somehow following them, waiting for the right moment to pounce.

The delights and wonders of Caraval continued to dance all around them. Girls on the sidewalks staged duels with parasols, while bands of zealous players continued to hunt for clues. Yet Will felt as though the night had been knocked askew, as if his brain was fogged somehow, or his senses. The air was damper than usual. And the light seemed unnatural as well. The moon was barely more than a sliver, but it cast an eerie silver glow over the usually colorful shops and turned the water into liquid metal. Winston was unusually quiet and stuck so close to his legs that he and Hannibal tripped over the dog more than one.

"I still do not believe this is right, Will." Hannibal said, lowering his voice as they entered the curving lane that wove around the carousel covered in roses.

"A song for a donation?" the organist asked.

"Not now." Will replied.

The man started playing all the same. This time the carousel didn't turn. Its red flowers stayed in place, its animals unmoving, but the music was enough to muffle Hannibal's words as he went on. "I believe this hate shop you told me about is far to obvious to be any sort of clue, let alone the last."

"That could be why it is. So obvious no one looks at it twice." Will said, moving faster than he meant to as they passed the clothing shop where he had purchased his clothes.

Heavy storm clouds had wrapped around the moon, and unlike the last time Will had seen it, all the shop windows were dark. The hatter next to the clothing shop was almost too dark to see. Yet its outline was unmistakable.

Rimmed in a wide moat of black flower boxes that circles the round two-story building like an odd brim, the place was exactly like a top hat, with a path of buttons leading straight up to the black velvet door.

"This does not feel like Legend." Hannibal insisted. "I know he is known for his top hats, but he wouldn't be so... Blatant. So plain."

"I can barely see the shop in front of us. Not exactly blatant."

"Something is not right about this, Will." Hannibal said, speaking under his breath. "Allow me to go alone and check it first."

"Maybe neither of you should go." Beverly suddenly appeared by Will's side. Winston yelped and scurried to hide behind Hannibal with a bark before recognizing her. Her skirt and blouse were silver this time, her eyes and lips painted to match. She was a like a teardrop the moon had shed.

"Hey, I'm glad you decided to wear those clothes." she said, stepping closer to Will, nodding her approval. "They look good on you. Even better than when you bought them."

Hannibal looked between the two of them, his expression equal parts distrust and confusion. His nostrils flared as he took in Beverly's wintergreen scent. "Do you two know each other?"

"We went shopping together." Beverly answered.

Hannibal's eyes turned deadly. "You're the one who convinced him to buy those clothes?"

"And you must be the one who left him waiting so long in a tavern?" Beverly raised two appraising eyebrows woven with tiny silver gems, though she must have already known who Hannibal was from the drawings in her journal. "If you didn't want him shopping, maybe you shouldn't abandon him."

"I don't care if he shops." Hannibal said.

"Then you don't like his clothes?"

"Hey, I hate to break this up, but we're in a hurry." Will interrupted.

Beverly made an exaggerated point of looking the hatter's shop up and down distastefully, nose wrinkled. "Just a piece of advice, but I wouldn't bother with this place tonight. You won't find any goods deals there."

Thunder cracked above. Winston whimpered.

Beverly raised her head as drops of shimmering liquid fell from the sky, flashing like scattered jewels. "I need to go. I've never liked the rain; it washes all the magic away. I just

wanted to warn you: I think you're both about to make a serious mistake."

Silver rain continued to fall as the night swallowed Beverly up.

Drops of it clung to Hannibal's hair as he shook his head, his expression conflicted. "You need to be careful with that one. Though I do think she is right about this shop."

Will wasn't so sure. Beverly's dreams had given him some answers, but not all of them were accurate. He had no idea whose side the beta was really on. Probably no one's but her own.

The rain fell a little harder as Will strode closer to the door of the hatter. Hannibal was right- it didn't feel quite like Legend. There was nothing romantic or magical or macabre about it. Yet at the same time, it felt like *something*. Will had the feeling that he would make a discovery of some sort inside.

"I'm going in. The fifth clue requires a leap of faith, and following something that seems so wrong definitely counts as one. Even if it doesn't take me straight to Legend, it could still help me find Abby."

A bell tinkled as Will shoved open the door of the unusual shop, Winston glued to his side.

Peach bonnets, lime bowlers, yellow knit caps, velvet top hats, and flashy tiaras covered every inch of the domed ceiling, while pedestals of oddities sprouted around the shop like bizarre wildflowers. There were bowls of glass shoehorns, lines of invisible thread, birdcages full of ribbons crafted from feathers, baskets brimming with self-threading needles, and cuff links supposed made from dragon gold.

Hannibal trudged in after her, shaking ran from his person onto everything sight just as Winston did the same, including the gentleman who stood at an angle a few feet from the door.

Will's nostrils flared.

Even amid so many colors and fine things, this man stood out. He wore a dark jacket that fit across broad shoulders, his presence as large and powerful as the man himself. He was broader than Hannibal and taller, a cravat of the deepest red Will had ever seen tied around his neck. It matched the waistcoat beneath his jacket that contrasted his dark suit and drew the eye. It was clear he was powerful and his scent was filled with alpha notes, copper and burning all rolled into one. But what drew Will's eye was the silk-trimmed top hat.

"Legend." he murmured, his heart dropping.

"Pardon?" Dark hair became visible as the alpha pulled his top hat off and set it on a display of identical-looking hats. "That is kind, but you have me confused with someone else." he said.

His voice was strange. Deep and rough, but it was very careful, each word thought of and rolled slowly on his tongue before spoken. The way he said anything with an s sound in it was the most careful of all. He turned in fully in Will's direction, hand going up to his face.

Beside Will, Hannibal tensed, and Will froze as well. He had seen this alpha before. His face was not the kind that was easily forgotten. Strong and sharp good looks, not as fine as Hannibal's, but handsome all the same. He was shoving tinted goggles up on his forehead. The left side of his mouth was marred by a dark, jagged, pulling slightly at his lip, bisecting it. He smiled and revealed straight, sharp teeth that were perfect for biting something.

Will felt something flicker through him, but he did not look away. His eyes continued to take him in, fixing on those goggles.

This was the same man he had seen the night his vision had been altered. He hadn't noticed Will then, but he watched him now. His eyes were dark and alive.

Hannibal slide closer as Winston did the same, the dampness of his coat sinking through the thin material of Will's clothes and sending prickles over his skin. He didn't say a word, but the look he cut toward the other man was so clearly threatening. Will swore he felt the room shift. The colors in the shop seemed to grow violently brighter, all the scents sharper.

"I don't believe he can help us." Hannibal whispered.

"Help with what?" the man asked, his voice still low, slightly awkward from disuse.

But even though Hannibal continued to give him murderous glances, his tone remained even and calm. He looked at Will almost as if he had been expecting him.

He might not be Legend, but Will sensed that he was *someone*. He cautiously held out the buttons he had just pulled from his pocket. He had no idea what to do, but he hoped that showing them to him might do something, reveal some secret door like at the Uffitzi, or give him some line that would lead to a clue if this wasn't it.

"Could you take a look at these?" Will asked.

The alpha took his palm. He wore leather gloves, yet Will could feel beneath the supple material, his hands were large and powerful. He might have been an aristocrat, but he clearly did work of his own.

He lifted Will's hand to take a closer look at the buttons, though his eyes remained locked with Will's. Dark and alive and dangerous.

Hannibal cleared his throat. "You might do better to help if you were to actually look at the buttons, sir."

"I did. I have no interest in them." the alpha said, folding Will's fingers over the buttons, and before he could pull away, the alpha kissed his hand, letting his lips linger to an inappropriate degree.

"I believe we should go." Hannibal said.

His knuckles were white, his own hands clenched at his sides in a loss of composure that surprised Will, as if he was holding himself back from doing something violent. His scent was filled with notes of warning and aggression.

Will thought of leaving before Hannibal did anything either of them would regret- the thought passed through his mind of rule-breakers vanishing forever. But a leap of faith was not an easy thing. He reminded himself that the alpha's cravat had been in color after he had drunk the cider, which meant he had to be important.

The alpha watched him as if there were a question he hoped Will might ask. His lips curved briefly before he tampered down the smile, as if embarrassed by it, showing off a glimpse of his sharp teeth.

Hannibal wrapped a protective arm around Will as Winston began to growl. "I would appreciate it if you stopped looking at my fiancé like that. It is quite rude."

"Odd." the alpha said. "I thought he was mine."

Chapter End Notes

Okay, final chances to get your guesses in on this guy! I can't wait to see what you guys think!

Questions and comments are always welcomed!

Chapter 28

Chapter Summary

Night Four of Caraval

Chapter Notes

I can't promise the updates will be as frequent as they have been because I don't have any more chapters prepped, but I'll get them done as soon as I can. Please enjoy!

Thanks to everyone who commented! I appreciate it, and yep, you were all right!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Will's instincts told him to back up, to run or bare his teeth, but his body refused to do anything. It was like his brain had switched off.

He heard him say his name- *Count Francis Dolarhyde*- as he felt Hannibal tighten his arm around his shoulders.

"I believe you are mistaken, sir." Hannibal said smoothly. "You must have my fiancé confused with another. He has been getting that all week. Haven't you, *mylimasis*?" Hannibal squeezed his shoulder in a way that felt very much like a warning.

But Will remained too shocked to move. The buttons, as Hannibal had said, had never been clues. The black box, containing the clothes with too many buttons, had not been from Legend or his sister. *It had been a D, not an A, the note had been signed with after all. It had been a D, and D stood for Dolarhyde*.

Like Legend, it seemed his fiancé was also fond of playing games. Though the longer Hannibal kept his arm around Will, the less amused Count Francis Dolarhyde began to look.

Will was trying to picture this man being the alpha who had written all those wonderful letters to him. He knew you could not judge someone properly by the way they wrote a letter; it was so easily to sound different on paper than in person. He also did not want to judge Dolarhyde just because had a scar that some might have found disconcerting. He did not appear mean or unattractive or anything like that, but the feel of his presence was not quite what Will would have expected from his letters. The count he had corresponded with him had seemed as if he couldn't wait until they met so there would be no more need for secrecy. Now he wondered if he hadn't just written down all the things he thought Will might want to hear,

for this alpha seemed very different than how he had portrayed himself in his letters. He seemed far from transparent in just a glance, like he was wrapped in secrets. He moved with the same predator grace as Hannibal, had the same look in his eyes, but it was so much different than it was in Hannibal.

"It is lovely to meet you, Will. I hope you are not... Disappointed." the count said, still in that careful voice despite how deep and gruff it was.

Behind him, a door opened and the tailor returned, along with another man. Purple. Cloves. Plums.

"Mylimasis, I think we need to leave." Hannibal said, pulling open the front door the instant Will's father came into view.

Shades of purple and the glint of jewels on wedding bands flashed in front of Will's eyes, along with the memories of the scent of cloves and plums tangled with anger.

Will hesitated. Hannibal didn't. The instant Francis reached for Will- intentions unclear- Hannibal knocked over a bowl of glass eyes and used the distraction to pull Will through the door into a silver curtain of rain. Will gripped his hand, Winston right o his heels, as his father's angry words chased after him.

"Do what you need to stop him!" he called.

"William, wait!" the count called.

His voice was not menacing, but he could run fast, his long, strong legs covering the distance between them fast.

Will yanked Hannibal toward a covered bridge that he hoped was the same one fom two nights before. It wasn't. His father and the count continued after them, through winding streets and brightly lit shops, past people who clapped as if they were part of the show.

"This way- Come on!" Hannibal said, tearing Will away from the slippery main street, toward the canals, ripping through the crowd of people all scrambling for shelter. "Hop in."

"There's lightning! We can't get on the water!" Will protested, remembering everything his dad had lectured him about.

"If you have a better idea, please feel free to share it." Hannibal said, shoving Will into the boat.

He snatched Winston and plopped him in the bottom, taking the oars as he leapt into the elegant vessel.

"Will!" his father shouted out. "Don't do this-"

His words were cut off by a strike of lightning and the crash of thunder. In the silver-streaked night, Will saw something he had never witnessed before.

Garret Jacob Hobbs... Looked afraid. Raindrops raced down his cheeks like tears. He was sure it was just a trick of the light, but for a moment, he saw that his father truly did love him. But he knew that. Will knew his father loved him. The problem with his father was that he was loving until the moment he wasn't.

Beside him, the count's expression was concealed in the dark, but Will could have sworn that as they ran, the alpha had looked excited by the chase.

Will looked away and bundled Winston into his lap, hugging the dog tight as the oars cut through the water. Even if his father was capable of kindness, and even if the count had seemed exactly like the man Will had been prepared for, he still wouldn't have been able to bring himself to go back to either of them.

He had already made his choice, and he had made it long before he had run out of that hatter's with Hannibal. He did not know when the exact moment had occurred, but an arranged marriage with an alpha he had only met through letters was no longer something Will desired. He finally understood what Abigail meant when she had said there was more to life than being safe.

He watched as Hannibal took another heavy pull with the oars while more lightning spread across the sky like cracks in a teacup. Before meeting this alpha, Will had believed he could be content as long as he married someone who could take care of him and help him protect his sister, but Hannibal had brought out a desire for something more.

He remembered thinking that falling for Hannibal would be like falling in love with darkness, not the night, not an unknown cave, but that kind of darkness that lurked in humans themselves, in predators of all kinds, frightening, consuming, but so perfectly matched to what he kept locked away inside himself. But that was not quite right either. Hannibal matched the part of himself that had once frightened him more than anything, fearing that he was like his father, but that wasn't what it was. It was a matching darkness, but it was also like a starry night: the constellations were always there, constant, magnificent guides against the ever-present black. Somewhere, somehow, the two of them had begun to blur. Will was not sure if they would be able to survive a separation now.

"Will, did you hear what I said?"

Will dropped his gaze from the sky to the soaking-wet alpha in front of him. "What?"

"We need to get out of this boat!" Hannibal shouted through the rain as they bumped into a darkened dock.

"Where are we?"

"Palazzo delgi Uffitzi."

"No-" Will protested. Bedelia had already told him that Abigail wasn't here. "We need to keep looking for Abigail. I was wrong about the buttons, but there has to be something-"

"We can't stay on the water any longer. The lightning will kill us." Hannibal cut in.

As he spoke, more bolts of silver-white slashed the sky.

"But if my father finds us before we-"

"Do you even have an idea where to look right now?"

When Will didn't answer, Hannibal grabbed him and hauled both him and Winston, still locked in Will's arms, onto the dimly lit, shaking dock. The only light came from the Uffitzi's massive hourglasses and churning red crystals inside them. Beverly must have been right about the rain washing the magic away, for the Uffitzi no longer glowed. It had turned from golden to dull, plain white stone. In the courtyard, abandoned tents flapped in the wind, their tuneless snapping replacing the vibrant beat of the birds' songs from nights before.

"We need to find somewhere to dry off." Hannibal said, pushing sopping hair from his eyes.

"I want to keep the boat in sight." Will said, sliding under a nearby arch, where he could see the docks and anyone who might approach. "When the rain stops, we need to start searching again."

Hannibal didn't answer right away. "I think the game, or at least your part in it, should be over. I never should have brought you were. I can take you to a safe place, off the isle-"

"No!" Will cut him off with a snarl. "I am not leaving here without my sister. After what I've just done, my father will be even more furious when he finds Abigail, and he will take it out on her. He will kill her. I am not leaving her like a lamb for the slaughter."

"And what about you, Will? You will just continue to sacrifice yourself? Marry Francis Dolarhyde?"

Will wished he could just ignore that question. If he stayed in the game and his father caught him, he wouldn't kill him, he would make him marry the count, which in a way felt like a death sentence now. But if he didn't marry him, how could he protect Abigail and take care of her? He had no means. Little inheritance he could not access due to his father. "I don't know what I'll do."

Hannibal growled low in his throat. "So you are still planning to go through with your engagement?"

"I don't *know* if I am or not! But what other choices do I have? Wouldn't you do what it takes to protect your sister?"

The sheets of rain fell harder, and Will regretted those words.

Hannibal felt as if he hadn't. Mischa had died because he had failed. He waited for Hannibal to say something. To get angry for the words he had just said. Or to, maybe, reassure him in some sort of way. To tell Will he could be the other option. But even as he thought it, Will realized how ridiculous it sounded. Did he really think Hannibal was going to say he wanted to run off with him into another life, or marry him?

When more lightning tore through the night, Will had his answer. Hannibal stayed close by his side, but the alpha's expression was closed off. Will recalled the way he had dusted off his coat that first night. He might not have wanted Will to be the count's bride, but that didn't mean he planned on being with Will instead.

"I'm a fool." Will said, his voice dancing between breaking and shouting as he set Winston down. "None of this means anything to you. You saw my fiancé, got jealous, acted rashly, gave into instincts because he was another alpha, and now you regret it."

"Is that what you truly think?" Hannibal asked, his voice coming out rough and deep. "Do you believe I would risk crossing your father, placing you in danger like that, because I gave into *instinct?* Something as pointless as jealousy?" He laughed, as if those things were the most foolish things Will could have said.

"You're such a liar." Will snapped.

Hannibal flattened his lips into a thin, harsh line "I believe I have already told you that."

"No, you lie to yourself. You pull me to you whenever it looks like you're afraid of losing me, but whenever I get too close, you push me away." Will said.

"I have only pushed you away once." Hannibal countered, taking a step closer. "Yes, I was certainly jealous, but that was the only reason I wanted you out of there."

"Then please, Mr. Lecter, enlighten me." Will said, folding his arms across his chest and lifting a brow.

Hannibal edged closer, until there was almost no space between them. Will could feel the wet of his clothes, clinging to his own. Slowly, Hannibal wrapped an arm around his waist, as if giving him the chance to move away if he wished. But Will had already made his decision. His heart beat faster as Hannibal's other arm encased him, tightening around his upper back, pulling Will closer to the hard planes of his chest until their lips were feeling the same cold air.

"Is this close enough for you, Will?" Hannibal breathed, his mouth hovering over Will's. A whisper shy of kissing him. "You are certain you want this?"

Will nodded, afraid that a wrong choice of words might drive him away. With Hannibal it wasn't about protection- he just wanted to be with him. The man who had saved him from drowning in more ways than one. The man who had seen glimpses of the things he tried to hide away inside and accepted it without hesitation.

Hannibal's hand slid down to the small of Will's back, gentle and firm, slowly pulling him closer, while his other hand cupped the side of his face, grazing the skin of his cheek, before forging a new path down toward the scent gland on Will's neck.

"I do not want you to regret any of your choices." Hannibal said, and his tone sounded almost pained, as if he wanted Will to pull away, but everything about the way he continued to touch him made Will feel the opposite.

His fingers had traveled down to his scent gland and up against to rest on his mouth, tracing the line of his bottom lip. They tasted like wood and rain, damp from touching Will's clothes, smelling like Will's own scent of saltwater and lemons. "There are still things you do not know about me, Will."

"Then I'll just have to learn them." Will said.

Hannibal had shared about his sister and Legend, but there were obviously more shadows in his life.

Hannibal's fingers were still on his mouth. Slowly Will kissed them, one by one. A gentle touch of his lips, a teasing press of his teeth, but he could feel how much it effected Hannibal by the way his other hand gently dug into his lower back. Will had to concentrate to keep his voice from turning breathless as he looked up into Hannibal shadow-eclipsed face and said, "I am not afraid of your secrets."

"I wish I could say you shouldn't be." Hannibal murmured.

He stroked Will's lip a final time, then covered his mouth with his own. Saltier than fingers and more intense than the hand now covering his spine or the one tightening on his waist. Hannibal held him as if Will might slip from his grip, and Will clung to him, loving the feel of Hannibal's body against his.

Hannibal murmured words against Will's lips, too low for him to hear and sounding as if they might be in his native tongue, but Will imagined he knew what the alpha wanted to say as he coaxed his lips apart, letting Will taste the coolness of his tongue and feel the sharpness of his teeth as he grazed his tongue. Every touch created emotions Will had never felt before. Emotions and feelings as soft as velvet and as sharp as blades that were ready to draw blood.

Chapter End Notes

I know Francis's scar kind of gave things away, but oh, well. And the goggles I mention him wearing are primarily from the book (I've only seen the Red Dragon arc once, so I can't really remember).

Hope you enjoyed it! Polite questions and comments are always welcome!

Chapter 29

Chapter Summary

Night Four of Caraval.

Chapter Notes

Thanks for the comments! I really enjoyed them, and I hope you continue to enjoy this story! :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The moon seemed to stay out a little longer that night, casting a silver eye as Hannibal took Will's hand and wrapped it in his own. They kissed once more, gently and deliberately, reassuring each other with no words that they had no intention of letting the other go.

If it had been a different sort of story, they could have stayed like that, entwined in each other's arms until the sun came up, casting rainbows across the storm-ravaged sky.

But most of Caraval's magci ran on time, soaking up hours of day and turning them into wonders at night. And this night was running out. Nearly all the glowing beads in both of Palazzo delgi Uffitzi's hourglasses had spilled to the bottom. Like falling drops of blood. Like a scattering of rose petals.

Will paused.

"What's wrong?" Hannibal asked.

"I know what the last clue is. It's the roses." Will said, recalling the vase of flowers next to the box containing his clothes.

He had assumed they had been sent together, but they hadn't been. He had no idea what they could have meant, but they were all over the game. It made more sense to believe that they were part of the fifth clue; they had to symbolize something besides a sick homage to Mischa.

"We have to get back to Muskrat Inn and look at the roses. Maybe there's something on the petals, or a note attached to the vase."

"What if your father sees us when we go back there? Or your charming fiancé?"

"We'll take the tunnels." Will said firmly.

He dragged Hannibal through the courtyard, Winston bounding after them. It was already chilly out, but the air felt even colder when they reached the abandoned garden. Sketetal plants surrounded them, while the dreary fountain in the center dripped its melancholy siren song.

"I am not sure about this." Hannibal said.

"Since when did you become the nervous one?" Will teased, though he felt uneasy as well, and he knew it wasn't because of the present enchantment.

He had just made a vital mistake by going to the hatter's, and he wasn't eager to repeat that. But Beverly had been right when she had said some things were worth pursuit regardless of the cost. Will know felt as if he were trying to rescue himself alongside Abigail. He had not given much thought to this year's prize- the wish- but he was thinking of it now. If he did win the game, maybe he could save both of them.

Will removed his hand from Hannibal's and pressed against the Caraval symbol embedded inside the fountain. Just like last time, the water drained and the basin transformed into a set of winding stairs.

"Come on. The sun will be up any minute." Will said, waving Hannibal forward.

He could already picture it, bursting through the darkness, ushering in the dawn of the day he had originally meant to leave on. And for the first, despite everything that had happened since stepping foot on this isle, Will was glad he had remained, because he was now determined to win the game and sail away with more than just his sister.

He reached for Hannibal again as he stepped onto the stairs.

"Why does it seem as if you're always trying to leave the moment I show up?"

Garret Jacob Hobbs appeared at the other end of the abandoned courtyard, followed by the count, whose dark hair dripped water into his eyes; no longer did he seem excited by the challenge. No, he seemed determined, like something committed to catching its prey, and that was all the worse.

Will yanked Hannibal down the damp steps to the tunnel entrance, gripping his hand as Winston bounded ahead of them and his father and Francis gave chase. He didn't look back, but he could hear the pursuit, the thunder of their boots, pounding in him like his heartbeat as their scents filled his nose.

"Hannibal get ahead of me. Find the lever to shut the door before-" Will broke off as his father and Francis reached the stairs. Their shadows stretched out in the golden light, clawing at him from afar. It was too late to keep them from the tunnels now.

But Will and Hannibal were almost to the bottom of the stairs. Will could see the tunnels went off in three different directions: one lit by gold, one almost pitch-black, and the last

illuminated by silver-blue.

Ripping his arm from Hannibal's protective grasp, Will shoved the alpha toward the darkest tunnel. "We need to split up, and you need to hide.

"No-" Hannibal reached for him.

"You don't understand- after tonight, my father will kill you. He can't ever let me or Abby go." Will said, dancing backward.

"Then we won't let him catch us."

Hannibal wove his fingers through Will's and raced with him into the golden passage on the left.

Will had always liked the color gold. It was an autumn color, the color of the world changing seasons, and for some reason that gave him hope. Because things could change. And for a brief, shining moment, he dared to hope that it really did mean change. He hoped he could outrun his father, create his very own fate. And he almost did.

But he could not outrun his fiancé.

Will held his strong, gloved hand band around his arm. A moment later his head snapped back, scalp igniting with pain as his father snatched him by the hair.

He snarled and screamed as they hauled him away from Hannibal.

"Let him go!" Hannibal said, his voice not a shout, but it was all the more deadly for it.

"Don't take another step, or this will get worse." his father said, wrapping an arm Will's waist.

Francis had released him and his scent was uncertain; he clearly wasn't entirely sure what to do at the moment. His father's other hand was still twisted in his hair and a tear of pain escaped down Will's cheek. He could not see his father, but he could imagine te look on his face. This would truly only get worse.

"Hannibal, please get out of here." Will said, voice fighting to stay steady.

"I am not leaving you-"

"Not another step." Garret Hobbs repeated. "Remember the last time we played this game? My son will pay for your mistakes. It's the only way to learn."

Hannibal stopped, his eyes seeming to spark with red in the golden light.

"Much better." Garret Hobbs said, his hold relaxing on Will.

He pressed a kiss to his temple and Will fought down a shudder.

"This is to teach that alpha a lesson, Will. Not you. I'm sorry." he said and punched Will in the stomach, knocking all the air from his lungs.

He fell to his knees. His vision blanked as he hit the dirt. He could only feel the pain in that moment, the echo of his father's fist, and the dirt he had fallen into staining his hands as he struggled to get back up.

Around him, voices echoed off the walls. Scents clogged the air, filled with alpha rage and fear. When he stood, the world had changed.

"Is that really necessary?"

"Touch him again and I will-"

"I think you missed the point of my demonstration."

One by one, Will matched the voices to their owners as he took in the new scene. The count's passive expression had shifted to something cloudy and uncertain as he delicately helped Will stand. Across from them, too far out of Will's reach, his father stood with a knife to Hannibal's throat. Winston was growling low, but he didn't seem to know who to go after first.

"He just won't stay away from you, Will. He keeps trying to take you away." his father said, and it sounded almost... Pathetic.

"Father, please stop. I'm sorry I ran away. You have me now. Just let him go." Will rasped.

"But I let him go, how do I know you'll behave? How do I know you won't try to leave again?"

"I agree with your son." Francis said, his voice rough and low.

His arm now curled around Will, almost protectively, and Will wondered if he had been tricked and manipulated by his father, too.

"I think this is going too far."

"I won't kill him." his father said, his eyes crinkling at the corners, as if they were all bein unreasonable. "I am only giving Will a little extra incentive not to do this again."

Will's hands shook with fear and rage as his father adjusted the knife. He had thought nothing could be so painful as watching him hurt Abigail, but the blade, so close to the arteries in Hannibal's neck, added a different sort of terror to his life.

"Please, Father. I promise, I won't disobey you again. I won't." Will got out, clenching his fists.

"I've already heard you make that promise, Will, and it's a promise you keep breaking. This time, I think you'll finally keep it." Garret Hobbs said, and began to move his arm.

"No-!"

Francis held Will back as his father slashed his knife down Hannibal's face, curving down his jawbone toward his mouth, bringing forth a gush of blood.

Hannibal did not make a noise as Will fought to reach him. But he was powerless to do anything other than struggle and kick, and he feared his father would do worse than he already had it tried to bite the count. He had probably shown too much emotion, fought too hard, as it was.

Will waited for Hannibal to fight back. To grab the knife. To run away. To do anything. He remembered how strong Hannibal was. He imagined, even bleeding and injured, he could overpower his father. But for a man who had started out so selfish, he now seemed determined to keep his ridiculous word and stay with Will. He stood stoically as a wounded statue as something inside Will began to shatter like a dropped teacup.

"Now, I think we're done." his father said.

"You know-" Hannibal turned to Francis, speaking through a bloodied smile- "it is rather pathetic to torture a man simply to get an omega to be with you."

"I might have been wrong about being finished here." Garret Hobbs said, lifting his knife once more.

Will tried to break free from Francis, but his arms were wrapped beneath that vice-like arm, making it impossible.

"You are only making this worse, Will." the count muttered, his words carefully yet slightly tripping off the s sounds.

Then louder, to his father, sounding almost bored, "There is no need to for this. He wants a reaction." He sounded as if he couldn't care less about Hannibal's words, yet Will could feel the quickening of his heart and the heat of his breath on his neck, even as the alpha added, "Give him a handkerchief. He is still bleeding."

Garret tossed Hannibal a tiny square of cloth, but it was barely enough to soak up the blood, let alone keep pressed to the wound. Will could see the dark droplets fall to the ground as their grim party started forward, a hiss from Will making Winston behave.

The entire journey back to Muskrat Inn, Will tried to think of a way to escape. Despite his wound, Hannibal was still strong. Will imagined he could have easily fled, or at least tried to fight back. But he marched silently beside his father while Francis held Will's limp hand.

"It will be all right." the count murmured.

Will wondered what type of delusional he was to think such a thing. He almost hoped they would find a dead body again, giving him a chance to break away. He hated himself for the idea, but it didn't stop him from thinking that.

When they emerged from the tunnel into the ruins of Abigail's ruined room, Francis made an effort to dust himself up, while Will debated the benefits of running. It was clear his father had no intention of letting Hannibal go. He eyed Hannibal in the way a child might eye his younger sister's doll before chopping off all the hair, or perhaps the head.

"I'll let him go tomorrow, at the end if the night, after you've behaved yourself." Garret Hobbs wrapped an arm around Hannibal's shoulder, while the cloth held to Hannibal's cheek continued to drip blood.

"Father, he needs medical attention!"

"Will, do not worry about me." Hannibal said.

Obviously, he still didn't realize how much worse this could get.

Will tried a final time. He could see no way out of this for her, but maybe it wouldn't be too late for Hannibal. If he got away, he could still save Abigail and get her away from their father. "Please, Faher, I will do whatever you want, but he you have to let him go first."

His father relaxed a bit. This was exactly what he wanted to hear. "I already said I would release, but I don't think he wants to leave yet." He squeezed Hannibal's shoulder. "Do you want to leave, sailor?"

Will tried to catch Hannibal's eyes, tried to silently beg him to leave with a look, but he was being more stubborn than ever. Will wished he would turn back to the careless alpha he had first met on Wolf Trap. His selflessness would accomplish nothing here unless he wanted to die.

It seemed it was up to Will to find a way to end this.

"I have no other engagements today. Are we all going to go upstairs now, or do you plan to have us all sleep in here?"

"Oh, we won't be staying together- at least, not all of his." Garret Jacob Hobbs said, and a tremor went through Will.

He was looking at him with the kind of expression that might have lit up another person's face before bestowing a gift- but when he went from loving to this, his gifts were far from pleasant.

"Count Dolarhyde and I have been sharing a room, but it will too cramped for four people. So, the sailor will stay in there with me, and Will, you will be sleeping in your own room with Count Dolarhyde. You'll be married soon enough, and your fiancé has paid quite the sum for this arrangement. I don't see why I need to make him wait any longer to enjoy what I promised him." he said, and Will was shocked.

His horror escalated as he stared at his father. This was the last thing he would have expected from him. His father kept such a tight hold on his children, had seemed so reluctant to even arrange Will into a match, that Will would have expected him to not release any sort of hold

until the wedding night. It was horrible enough to know that he had been purchased like a sheep, that a price had been placed on him rather than just an arrangement for other reasons made. It was saying that was all Will was worth.

"Father, we aren't married yet, it isn't proper-"

"No, it's not." his father acknowledged, cutting Will off. "But we have never been a proper family, and you are not going to complain, unless you want to watch your friend bleed more. The count will take far better care of you than this sailor will." He touched the undamaged side of Hannibal's face.

Hannibal didn't move, but he no longer wore the placid expression he had borne in the tunnels. Everything about him had intensified. He caught Will's eyes, a silent fire raging in his. He was trying to tell him something, though Will had no idea what it could be. All Will could feel was the nearness of Count Dolarhyde; he imagined the alpha's hands were eager to claim his body, as his father's hands were eager to inflict on who he viewed as a threat.

"Call it an early wedding gift that I am not harming him further. But if you say another word aside from *yes*, my generosity ends." his father said firmly.

"No. You will not touch him again, because I will not do another thing unless you release him right now." Will growled.

He turned to face the count. He did not appear as if he were enjoying this. He was frowning, distorting the scar tugging at his lip. He made no move to stop Will's father, and just the sight of him, standing there and doing nothing when he could so clearly overpower the governor, made Will sick to his core.

Abigail had been right. *You think your marriage is going to save you, but what if the count is as bad as Father, or worse?*

Will didn't know if this man was actually worse than his father, but in that moment he felt just as vile. He no longer held his hand gently as he had in the hatter's; his grip was firm, assured. He had even more strength than he appeared to have. He could most certainly stop this, if he chose to do so. A muscle in his jaw was feathering, as if he were thinking of it, and Will seized that.

"If you let this happen-" Will paused, forcing himself to meet the man's eyes, searching for a trace of the alpha he had exchanged so many letters with- "if you use the threat of his punishment to control me, I will never obey you, respect you, or accept you. But if you let him go, if you show some mercy and the humanity you showed me in your letters, I will be your perfect mate." He recalled Hannibal's words from in the tunnels and added, "Do you really want an omega who will only sleep with you because another man will be tortured if he doesn't?"

Something flickered in those dark eyes. Will's heart beat faster with every spark that flashed through them. Frustration. Embarrassment. Wounded pride. Guilt.

"Let him go. Or our deal is over." the count said, his voice lower and rougher than ever.

"But-"

"I will not argue this." Francis said, his scent billowing around them in a show of alpha authority.

Garret Jacob Hobbs did not look pleased to have his only current piece of leverage taken away. Yet, despite that, he released Hannibal without further argument, shoving him toward the door. "You heard him. Leave. But if you come near my family, if you try to take them away again, I will end you."

"Will, you don't need to do this for me." Hannibal said, shooting a warning look toward Will. "You can't give yourself to him. I don't care about what happens to me."

"But I care." Will said, and though he wanted to look at Hannibal's beautiful face one last time, to show him that he thought he was the furthest thing from a scoundrel or a liar, he didn't dare meet his eyes. "Now, please, leave, before you make this harder."

Chapter End Notes

I think I've said this before, but I will say it again: Garret Jacob Hobbs is very much based off the father in the actual book *Caraval*, but I tried to add what we know of his character to this. I am also aware that D is a little to a lot out of character in this, but he is SO hard to write. In the show he barely spoke, and he very much avoids using 's' when he speaks if he can, which almost killed me in the process of writing this.

I hope you enjoyed! Polite questions and comments are always welcome!

Chapter 30

Chapter Summary

Night Four of Caraval

Chapter Notes

Possibly more out of character Francis for you all. Enjoy. (Also, the letter s can go straight to hell for making my life so hard with this chapter)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The crooked halls of Muskrat Inn felt shorter than Will remembered. Already he and Francis Dolarhyde were on the fourth floor, right outside his room, Winston like a ghost beside them.

There were so many ways his plan could go wrong. Francis held his glass key, but he looked down at him before he placed it in the lock. "Will, I would like you to know that in the tunnels, that was not me. I had no intention of things being like that between us." His eyes met Will's, far more gentle than the way they had in the hatter's. For a moment, Will could see something beneath his carefully polished appearance, as if this was just a type of coat he wore for show, and in reality, he felt as trapped as Will did. "I did not realize how bad your father really was. And the thought of losing you... Made me go a bit mad. I couldn't think clearly in the tunnels. I... It will be different when we're married. I will keep you happy and safe."

His words were careful and awkward, and he seemed almost... scared. Looked at Will like Will could break him, or he feared that he would break Will. With his empty hand, Francis brushed ever so lightly the Silve stripe in Will's facial hair (thicker than usual; there hadn't been time for shaving) and for a dreadful moment Will thought the alpha was going to lean down and kiss him. It every ounce of the strength he had gained in the last week not to cringe or snap his teeth.

"I believe you." Will murmured.

Though no words could have been further from the truth. He knew the tunnels could drive people into madness, twist them to make them do things- or allow things- they might not usually. But even if the count kept him safe from this point on and never lifted a finger against him, took care of Abigail as he had promised in his letters, no universe existed where Count Francis Dolarhyde would ever truly make Will happy. Not when the only person he wanted to be with in that way was Hannibal.

Fear was hooking into his inside as the count opened the door of the room.

Again, Will thought of all the ways his plan could go wrong.

He could have misread Hannibal.

Hannibal could have misread him.

His father could come and listen on the other side of the door- Will had heard of such things happening to confirm the consummation of marriages.

Will's hands were slightly dampened with sweat as he followed Francis into the heated chamber. The massive bed, which had looked so inviting the first time Will had seen it, now looked like a silent threat. Its four posts made him think of a cage. He imagined Francis drawing the curtains around it and trapping him inside. He slid his eyes toward the wardrobe, hoping Hannibal would appear through the hidden door, or possibly burst from inside. It was large enough to hold a person. But the doors were closed, and they remained that way.

It was only Will and the count and the bed.

Now that it was just the two of them, Francis moved much differently. Still with the same sort of predator grace as Hannibal did, but it was different, replaced with something that felt very much like a show.

He slowly pulled his gloves off, setting them on a side table, followed by the goggles Will was now certain were to draw attention from his scar. Then he shed his jacket and began to undo the buttons on his waistcoat, creating tiny popping sounds that made Will sick. He couldn't do this.

Watching his father hurt Hannibal, Will finally understood what the alpha had been trying to tell him in the tunnels earlier. He had grown up thinking his father's abuse had been his own fault- the result of what happened when he made a mistake. But now he could clearly see: His father was responsible. No one deserved his *punishments*.

This was wrong too. When he had kissed Hannibal, it had felt right. Two people choosing to give tiny vulnerable parts of themselves to each other. Knowing they could share and share and the other person would listen and accept, and eventually the two of them would begin to blur. That was what Will wanted. That was what he deserved. No one else had the right to decide this for him. Yes, his father had started treating him as a possession in ways, even when he was loving, especially since Will's dad had died. But Will was not a thing to be bought or sold. His dad hadn't been bought or sold, and neither had his father, or Abigail's mother, for that matter. He had seen love that had been found and earned and he would not allow the man who had that for himself take it away from him.

When his dad had died, Will had always felt as if he had limited choices, and when Louise had died, he had felt as if he didn't have any at all, but now he was starting to realize that he did. He just needed to be bold enough to make the difficult ones.

Another pop drew Will's attention, and he saw that Francis had undone his cuffs, letting them gape open around his muscular wrists. He was looking at Will oddly, and Will wondered if he was thinking of stripping him of his damp 'bridal' clothing and making the deal complete.

"It's chilly in here, huh?" Will grabbed the fireplace poker and stoked the logs, watching the fire flare over the metal until it turned shades of brilliant red-orange.

"I think that's enough." The count placed a firm hand on Will's shoulder.

Will spun around and aimed the hot poker at his face. "Don't touch me." he hissed.

"Will." Francis appeared only mildly surprised, and not nearly as afraid as Will would have liked. "I am not going to force you, no matter what your father thinks. Put that down before you hurt one of us." he said, stumbling slightly over an *s*.

"If someone gets hurt, it will only be because I want them to get hurt." Will said, inching the poker closer, stopping right below his dark eye "I'd prefer you over me. Don't move or breathe a word if you want your sight completely intact."

The count's scent was odd, calm but with some dark notes that were like fury and fear mixed together, souring his scent, and the fear was the strangest of all. "I don't think you realize what you are doing, Mr. Graham-Hobbs."

"*Graham*. Just Graham. I'm not yours. I will never be yours. And I know perfectly well what I am doing. Now get on the bed." Will snarled, motioning with the poker.

The heated glow he had managed to get the tip to was quickly fading, far faster than he had thought it would. He had thought to tie Francis to the bed, but there was no way for that to work, even with Winston snarling on his other side. The minute he set down his weapon, Francis would be on him. And despite the threats, Will was not sure if he could bring himself to use the poker.

"I know you're frightened." Francis said in a low voice. "But you have no reason to harm me. I don't want to hurt you. *He* does, but I won't let him." Those last words baffled Will, but he latched onto one.

Harm.

The elixir of protection.

The vial he had bought in the tent at the Palazzo had slipped Will's mind. But it was still in the pocket of his enchanted clothes. He just needed to get to the wardrobe.

"Back all the way you to the bedpost." Will barked, backing away as Francis did what he was told.

Then he bolted for the wardrobe. The count leapt up the moment he turned, but Will was already opening the wooden doors.

With a loud crash, Hannibal fell out. His skin was tinged gray and bleeding. Will's heart cracked.

"Why is he there?" Francis said, sounding shocked.

He froze just long enough for Will to reach inside and snatch the elixir. He could do nothing for Hannibal unless he took care of Dolarhyde first.

He ripped the top off the bottle as the count was distracted by Winston tearing into his ankle and tossed the contents all over the alpha. The spray smelled of daisies and urine.

Francis choked and spluttered. "What is this?" He dropped to his knees as he tried to throw Winston off, but he looked like an infant trying to fist a dog's fur on their way to standing. The elixir worked fast, dimming his reflexes to a clumsy crawl.

"You are making a mistake." He continued wilting to the floor as Will rushed to Hannibal, whistling to call Winston off.

"Legends wants this." the count slurred, tripping harshly over the 's' sounds, and Will did feel a bit sorry for that. "Your father told me the history... of your grandmother and Legend. I have no idea who *he* might be." The count cut his drooping eyes toward Hannibal. "But you are playing right into Legend's grasp. He brought you to this isle to destroy our marriage, to ruin your life."

"Well, then I guess he's failed." Will said, lifting his chin. "From where I'm standing, it looks like Legend just did me quite the favor."

Hannibal's eyes fluttered open as Will helped him from the floor, and his ex-fiancé finished crumpling to the floor.

"Legend doesn't do anyone favors." the count mumbled, and as Will tugged Hannibal from the wound, he heard the last slurred words, as ominous as they were senseless. "You... Woke... The dragon..."

Chapter End Notes

I hope you enjoyed it! Around here is when things really start to twist away from the actual book, so we've got a lot of surprises and more Hannibal stuff coming.

Polite questions and comments are always welcome!

Chapter 31

Chapter Summary

Day Five of Caraval

Chapter Notes

Sorry this took so long; I got distracted by another fic that HAD to be written immediately. Please enjoy this installment!

Oh, also, I messed up with the placement of Hannibal's wound in the previous chapter. In the previous chapter, it reflected Will's scar from TWOTL, but in reality it was meant to be something more like this: - across his cheekbone toward his ear. That has been corrected in this chapter, and will (eventually) be changed in the previous chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Can you walk?" Will asked.

"I believe I am doing that right now." Hannibal said, his voice playful.

But there was nothing humorous about the wound that stretched across his cheek. If it had been deeper, he wouldn't be able to talk, the muscles would have been severed. He was lucky indeed. Will's arms were wrapped around him, keeping him steady.

"Will, please do not worry about me. We need to find Abigail."

"You need stitches first." Will said, eyes returning to the gash.

It would scar, and while it did not make him any less handsome, it did make Will ill to remember how fragile he had looked when he had fallen out of the wardrobe.

"You are overreacting, Will. It is not as bad as it looks. Your father barely scratched me. I doubt he would enjoy letting someone he hates as much as me to remain unconscious." he said in a reassuring tone.

"You were unconscious in that closest."

"I've recovered. I heal quickly." Hannibal pulled away from him, as if to prove it, when they reached the bottom floor. Light snuck in through cracks around the doors, illuminating candles placed inside sconces, preparing for another treacherous night. On the floor, a small

group of dedicated players slept huddled together. Waiting for evening to fall and the doors to unlock.

"We still should bandage it up." Will whispered.

"I merely need to clean it." Hannibal assured him.

He walked elegantly past the sleeping players into the tavern, though Will swore he was only half himself. His boots scraped the glass floor with an uneven gait as he went behind the bar and poured half a bottle of clear liquor over his face.

"See-" Hannibal winced, shaking his head, splattering more liquid on the floor- "It is not as bad as it seems."

A line still stretched from beneath his eye toward his ear. It actually wasn't as deep as Will had thought, but he could not ignore the feeling in the pit of his stomach.

Amid all that had happened he had lost track of time, but he imagined the sun would set in about two hours, welcoming the final night of the game.

To win, Will needed to find his sister before anyone else. And after what he had just done to the count- not only had he knocked him out, he had tied him to the bed before leaving- Will could all too clearly imagined how furious his father would be when he woke, and malicious punishment he would inflict on Abigail if he found her before Will. He wouldn't just kill her. He would do everything he had done to those other girls, the ones he had hunted, like Elise. He would consume her, too.

"I forget to check the roses." Will said suddenly.

"You were the one who said they were all over Caraval." Hannibal pointed out, taking a sip from the bottle before putting it away.

Which meant it would be impossible to figure out which roses were actually clues. There were probably hundreds of roses he had never seen as well. The first clue he had received said: *And number five requires a leap of faith*. But Will had no idea if it was connected to the flowers. Too many roses and not enough time.

"Will, do not fall apart now."

Will looked up and found Hannibal in front of him, drawing him close before he could say the words "I'm not." Though Will imagined if Hannibal released him in this moment, he would. Fall to the floor. Fall straight through it. Fall and fall-

Hannibal kissed him, pressing his mouth to Will's until all he could feel or think about was him. The kiss tasted of the alcohol he had knocked back and a bit like blood, but his scent enveloped will with rich, deep notes. Depths of things that made Will feel safe and guarded.

"It will be all right." Hannibal murmured, and pressed his lips to Will's forehead.

Now Will was falling for altogether different reasons. Sinking into a feeling of security he had never known before. As Hannibal's lips pressed to his temple, his arms wrapped around him as if he wanted to protect him- not possess him or control him, and knowing that while he could take care of himself, everyone needed protection sometimes. He wouldn't let Will crumble. He wouldn't toss him from the balcony as Legend had in Will's dream.

"Hannibal." Will said, looking up abruptly, as the words from the clue, *leap of faith*, suddenly ricocheted through his skull.

"What's wrong?" Hannibal asked.

"I need to ask you something about Mischa."

Hannibal stiffened.

"I wouldn't ask if it wasn't important, but it might just help us find Abigail."

"Go ahead." Hannibal said, and despite the shuttered look on his face, his voice was soft. "Ask whatever you want."

"I've heard things about her death, but the accounts are all conflicting. Could you tell me how she really died?"

Hannibal took a deep breath. Obviously the subject was painful, but he said, "After what happened, and when he was done with her... Mason threw her from a balcony."

A balcony. Not a window, as Will had overheard in his dream, and thrown instead of jumping herself. No wonder Hannibal hadn't been excited at the sight of all the balconies at the beginning of the game. They were fifty cruel reminders of what he had lost. Legend was truly monstrous, and if Will was correct, he had set up this game for a twisted repeat of history with either Will or Abigail. Hannibal had never denied that he had done anything to Mischa, either. He would know that Hannibal wanted revenge. More and more twistings of the past. *A leap of faith indeed*.

With a deep breath, Will worried that was what it would take- that he would have to jump off a balcony to save his sister.

He kept the thought to himself as he told Hannibal of his dream involving Legend and the balcony. "I think we need to search the balconies for our last clue."

Hannibal pushed a hand through his bangs "There are dozens of them, all with different entrances. I can not see how this is a better plan."

"It's all I got. And either way, we need to start searching now." Expecting an argument, Will went on, "I know going out in the daylight is against the rule, but it doesn't seem to me that Legend really plays by the rules. The innkeeper said that if we don't make it in before daybreak after the first night, we didn't get to play, but he didn't mention the *rest* of the nights."

Will lowered his voice, just in case some of the people in the hall were actually awake. "All the doors are locked so people think they can't get out, but we can leave using the tunnels. If we go right now we can get a head start on the count, my father, and the rest of the these people, and maybe we can actually win."

"Now you are finally thinking like a player." Hannibal smiled, but it looked as flat as a line in a painting. Will wondered if his fearless Hannibal now feared his father too, or if he dreaded the same thing Will did, that to save Abigail one of them would have to take a deadly leap.

Chapter End Notes

There we go! Hope you enjoyed (and please ignore the disappearing Winston).

Polite questions and comments are always appreciated!

Chapter 32

Chapter Summary

Day Five of Caraval

Chapter Notes

*Sets chapter down and slinks away

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hannibal's hand and Winston's tail were the only things that felt truly solid as they emerged from the tunnels and into a realm that appeared entirely different when lit by the sunshine of late afternoon.

The Caraval sky was a creamy blur of butter and vanilla swirls. It reminded Will of an elaborate cake and part of him though the air around him should taste like sugar and vanilla, but all he could taste was dust and haze.

"Where do you wish to look first?" Hannibal asked.

The balconies surrounded the entire perimeter of the game. Will arched his neck, searching for a glimpse of movement or anything odd on any of the closest ones, but the blanket of mist obscured his sight. On the ground, shops that looked so colorful at night now appeared almost blurry. The elaborate fountains, dotting every other corner of the street, spilled no water. The world was an unsettling mix of stillness and quiet and milky fog. No colorful boats traveled the canals and no one walked the cobbled streets.

Will felt as though he had stepped into a half-remembered memory. As if this magical place had been abandoned long ago, and he was coming to find nothing as he recalled it to be.

"This doesn't even look like the same place we entered." Will murmured.

He was happy not to stray far from Hannibal or Winston. He had feared that the moment they stepped out onto the balcony, someone would try to remove them from the game for breaking a rule, and they would disappear just as everyone else had in the stories. N one had, and this strange, faded reality was almost more frightening.

"I can't see any of the balconies from here."

"Let's not focus on those, then. Perhaps a leap of faith is meant to be something different." Hannibal said, eyeing the railings high above distastefully. "You said before, you though the clue involved the roses. Does anything else here remind you of your dream of Legend?"

Will's first thought was, *Legend has left this place*. He saw no top hats, no rose petals of any color, no colors brighter than palest yellow, smelled nothing but their own scents and mist. But while his eyes and nose were letting him down, his ears pricked at the strains of a gentle melody.

Subtle. So quiet it almost sounded like a memory, bouncing around the confines of his skull, but as Will moved forward with his two companions, the soft music grew into something more solid and soulful. It hummed and purred from the street with the rose-covered carousel, the only spot not infected with the fog. He remembered that it was also one of the few things that had remained in color and in focus when his vision had turned to black and white and nearly gone.

Brighter than any freshly spilled blood, the carousel appeared even more alive than when Will had last seen it. It was so vibrant and eye-catching he almost didn't see the man sititng at the pipe organ beside it H ewas far older than most of the other works he had come seen throughout the game, perhaps around Jimmy's age, his face weatherworn and a bit sad, mirroring his melody. He stopped playing when Will and Hannibal approached, Winston easy at Will's side. The echoes of the music hung in the air like a lingering scent.

"Another song for a donation." he said in an accent voice, holding out a hand and looking at Will expectantly.

It should have struck Will as strange the first time he had seen this man that he would ask for coins in a place where people so rarely used them.

He turned to Hannibal, not wanting to repeat the mistake he had made with the hatter. "Does this feel like Legend to you?"

"If feeling like Legend is mildly disturbing and filled with symbolism, then yes, quite." Hannibal cast a gaze over the rose-drenched carousel and its fantastic animals, letting it sweep over the man at last. "Do you believe this will lead to balcony holding your sister?"

"I'm not sure, but I know it will definitely take us somewhere."

Beverly had been right when she had warned Will and Hannibal away from the hatter's by saying they were making a mistake. It made sense to believe that she had also been trying to help when she had brought Will here before, to this very particular carousel. It could have been a coincidence, but even if it had been, Will doubted it was also a coincidence that when there was not another person in sight, they would come back here and find the organ player waiting.

"All right. Here." Hannibal said, pulling some coins from his pocket.

Remembering Beverly's words, Will added, "Play something pretty."

The song that followed was not pretty at all: it rasped out of the pipes like a dying man's final breaths. But it did made the carousel spin around. Slowly at first, yet hypnotic in its graceful movements. Will could have stood there and watched forever, but in his dream, just before Legend had tossed him from the balcony, the man had warned Will not to observe.

"Come on." He let go of Hannibal and leaped onto the spinning wheel, landing between a dragon and a rearing boar.

Hannibal looked as though he were about to say something, but he jogged alongside the spinning carousel and leapt on swiftly. Winston barked and ran with the wheel, unable to find a way to get on.

The carousel began to turn faster and soon they were on opposite sides, fingers bleeding as they searched through bushes covered in thorns that swathed the center of the creation and many of its poles. Looking for a symbol that would a passage of stairs.

"William, I am not seeing anything!" Hannibal shouted over the music. The tune grew louder and more off-key as the carousel twirled faster, shedding more and more petals that were swept up into the sky like a bloody cyclone.

"It's here somewhere!" Will shouted back. He could feel it with every prick of his fingers. There would not be so many thorns if nothing was hiding beneath them. Thorns protected roses. Again, Will felt as if there was a lesson to be learned from this carousel, but before he could figure it out, he dodged between two massive black, feathered stags awaiting riders, and he saw their mirror with the teardrop shining like a lighthouse to him. It was hidden beneath a rosebush, shaped to look like an appropriately-sized fawn guarded between the stags.

Will gripped the stems to keep from falling as he crouched to press his finger against the symbol of Caraval. One touch and the entire emblem filled with blood.

The carousel spun even faster. Round and round. And as it spin in a destructive dance the center disappeared, turning into a circle of dark. A whole made of a black sky robbed of stars. A pool of spilled ink of the blackest of blacks. Unlike the other passages, there were so stairs this time. Will couldn't see the bottom.

"I think we need to jump." Maybe he had been wrong about the balcony. Maybe *this* was the leap of faith.

"Wait-" Hannibal edged around the whole, seizing one of Will's bloody hands before he could take the leap.

"What are you doing?!" Will shouted.

"I want you to take this." Hannibal pulled out a pocket watch on a long, circular chain and pressed it into Will's hand. "Inside the cover I etched the coordinates of a boat, just off the coast of the isle."

Fresh panic filled Will as Hannibal's face grew more serious. This felt too much like a good-bye. "Why are you giving this to me now?"

"In case we are separated, or something unexpected happens. That boat is already crewed; it will take you anywhere you wish to go and-" Hannibal broke off, and for a moment it appeared as if he would remain silent. His face grew pained as the carousel jolted and slowed, and the hole in the center began to shrink. "Will, you need to go now!" He released Will's hand.

"Hannibal, what aren't you telling me?"

His lips feel into a rough line, an expression of sadness and regret spreading across his face all at once, and they were emotions his scent supported. "There is no time for all the things I wish I could say."

Will wanted to ask more questions. He wanted to know why Hannibal, who moments before held his hand as if he never planned to let him go, looked at him as if he feared they would never see each other again. But the hole was still closing.

"Don't make me use this without you!" Will looped the chain round his neck and stood.

Then he leaped.

He thought he heard Hannibal shout something about not trusting Legend as he fell. But his words were muffled by the rushing water, roaring as it welcomed Will into a river of cold.

Will gasped for air, arms flailing wildly to keep from sinking. He was glad it was water as opposed to landing on a slab of rock or a bed of knives, but the current was too strong for him to fight. It sucked him in, dragging him down a path that felt eternally long and was not of his choosing.

His entire body was steeped in cold but Will forced himself not to panic. He could do this. The water wasn't trying to punish him. He always found peace in the quiet of the stream. He relaxed until the current eased up. Then, with steady, even strokes, and pulls he worked his way back to the surface, kicking hard until he found himself at a set of wide steps.

Slowly, Will's eyes adjusted as small green lights, as infinitesimal as bits of dust, flickered to light. They swarmed the air like the fireflies at the fountain near the entrance, casting jade illumination over two gray-blue soapstone statues guarding the entrance to the steps.

Twice as tall as Will, and cloaked in robes that disappeared beneath the water, the figures' hands were clasped in silent prayer. But though their eyes were closed, their faces were far from peaceful. Their mouths stretched wide, calling out in silent agony as Will pulled himself onto the black stone of the staircase.

"I was beginning to lose faith in you." The click of a walking stick pressed against the stone, as one by one the polished steps brightened.

Though it was not the stairs nor the murky places they led, but the young man in the velvet top hat who captured Will's full attention.

He blinked and the man was suddenly in front of him, reaching out a hand to help Will to his feet. "I am so glad you have finally made it, Will."

Chapter End Notes

I hope you enjoyed this chapter. I hope to get this work done soon, but doing battle with two hyperfixations is hard and sometimes the other side wins.

Polite comments and questions are always welcome!

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!